THE ECONOMY & WOMEN’S LABOUR

Women contribute to development not only through remunerated work but also through a great deal of unremunerated work. On the one hand, women participate in the production of goods and services for the market and household consumption, in agriculture, food production or family enterprises. On the other hand, women still also perform the great majority of unremunerated domestic work and community work, such as caring for children and older persons, preparing food for the family, protecting the environment and providing voluntary assistance to vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals and groups. This work is often not measured in quantitative terms and is not valued in national accounts. Women’s contribution to development is seriously underestimated, and thus its social recognition is limited.

- Paragraph 156, Beijing Platform for Action

Women with family responsibilities are being encouraged to carry out double workday: in an economic activity as well as in family and domestic responsibilities.

- Union of Myanmar, “Report on the CEDAW”

Actually men can make more money than women. But nowadays if a family has five people at least four people must work, or all of them must work. Otherwise they can’t survive. The more people in a family can work, the better it is for the family.

- CINT 200

If the military junta ruled the country wisely and fairly, we wouldn’t be in this situation. Everybody wants to stay together with their parents and families and live in harmony. Especially young boys and girls want to live under the shelter of their parents’ roof. We also want to live with our children and husbands, but we have no chance to make a living this way, and we must live apart from each other.

- CINT 193

It’s no use talking about women’s rights unless you take measures to give them a degree of economic independence. Unless a woman is economically independent, it is very difficult for her to assert her rights.

- Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, December 1999

OVERVIEW

Throughout the world, the work that women do often goes unrecognized or is not called work. In Burma, too, the role that women play in the economy remains undervalued. The many unremunerated tasks that women perform caring for their families have not been included in the country’s overall labour picture. While increasing numbers of women work outside the home, traditional stereotypes still dictate in large part the occupations in which they are engaged and the status their labour is accorded.

Government mismanagement of the economy has profoundly affected society, changing relationships between people and ways in which families live, often requiring that some family members migrate and seek employment to support the others. For the most part gendered perceptions regarding work have not kept pace with the massive shifts that economic crisis has introduced. Increased female representation in the paid labour force as a whole cannot be seen as a realization of greater equality between the sexes, since the decision to work usually arises out of economic exigency and implies few real alternatives.

Persistence of gender stereotypes means that the burden of making ends meet still falls most heavily on women, who are largely responsible for their families’ survival in everyday terms. Despite significant changes in the country’s economic structure, women are also still responsible for the bulk of the housework and child-rearing activities, whether they devote most of their time to these activities, or engage in other income-generating work outside the household or from home. While women who work primarily in the home are perceived to have more leisure time, in fact most work from waking till sleeping with very little time they can call their own. Family responsibilities and social attitudes still deny women equal opportunities with men to work outside the home, even though their incomes are needed as much
or more than men’s are – and sometimes (for example, through trade) women can earn more.

At present, women’s income-earning opportunities are largely determined by their educational backgrounds, and the area of the country in which they live. In rural communities, where women work alongside men doing farming, very few wage-earning opportunities exist. Rural women are also particularly cut off from alternatives and programs to increase their standard of living, in large part because of the civil war and the militarization of Burmese society. Throughout Burma, because of the lack of job opportunities, growing numbers of disadvantaged women are turning to sex work inside the country or leaving the country in search of other options.

The paid employment available to the majority of the country’s women is poorly remunerated, including in comparison to men’s labour of equal value. With little regulation of working conditions, women compete for positions that are often considered exploitative, undesirable and inappropriate. Few women work in conditions that respect occupational safety, motherhood or women’s health generally. In all areas, women are subjected to forced labour, which deprives women of other wage-earning opportunities and often affects their health. Significant improvements to women’s status cannot be undertaken until the economic nature of many of the problems they face is addressed.

THE ECONOMY

Economic deterioration is the single greatest problem affecting people country-wide, in all areas and from all socio-economic groups. Attempts to control economic activity by successive military regimes have resulted in widespread corruption and macro-economic mismanagement, transforming resource-rich Burma from one of Asia’s most prosperous countries in the 1950s to one of the poorest in the 1990s. In the 1960s, the socialist regime nationalized all industry, placing government personnel lacking necessary expertise in management positions. The country has never recovered. In 1987, after two and half decades of isolation, Burma was given least developed country (LDC) status at the United Nations, a source of great embarrassment and shame for many of its people.

Shortly after seizing power in 1988, the SLORC announced a return to an open market economy, although most investment continues to take the form of joint ventures requiring government approval. The shift to semi-privatization has been characterized by large-scale and wanton primary resource extraction, including rapacious logging of border forests and construction of a controversial gas pipeline, built by Unocal (US) and Total (France) across indigenous lands contested by insurgent groups in the country’s southern Tenasserim peninsula. According to the *Myanmar Times*, 38% of the GDP comes from primary industry. Logging and petroleum exploitation continue to force communities off their lands and deprive them of resources including access to water, fuel, food and land on which to cultivate. Local people have benefited little from resource extraction projects or other joint venture investments, for instance in the tourist industry, since few are hired. Rather, it is alleged that much of this investment has only increased the toll of forced labour on local populations.

The receipts from the informal economy in Burma have long been thought to equal or exceed that of the formal economy. There is a swift cross-border black market trade in commodities, including ordinary goods such as onions, rice, oil, detergent and a host of other agricultural and consumer products arbitrarily banned from export. However, the more profitable trade is in illicit items. With a yield of 2000 tons per year, Burma is also the biggest opium producer in the world, and since the mid-1990s has started exporting large quantities of amphetamines and other synthetic drugs to neighbouring countries. The regime’s critics have long alleged that receipts from drugs, as well as other export items such as gems and timber, are used to underwrite the junta’s military expenditures, estimated by some analysts to be half or more of the annual government operating budget. Despite SPDC claims to the contrary, the country’s economic situation has deteriorated steadily since the 1997 onset of the South East Asian economic crisis. Perhaps because of its insistence that “development” must precede human rights, the junta has shown itself to be extremely sensitive to criticism of its economic performance. On 7 July 2000, Deputy Minister of Planning and Economy Zaw Tun made a speech to a seminar that included foreign businesspeople. Speaking frankly, he discussed his government’s lack of transparency, including miscalculation of the GDP, inconsistent trade policy, artificial fixing of the
exchange rate, printing of currency in order to cover debt, resulting in inflation, and inappropriate planning. As a reward for his honesty, a month later on 10 August he was relieved of his duties and stripped of his status as a brigadier general.

Since the mid-1990s, as a result of the worsening economic climate in the country, and in some cases political concerns, many foreign investors have pulled out. Investment laws and a fictitious official exchange rate pegged at 6 kyat to the dollar (operating throughout the country alongside a black market exchange rate that averaged 500 kyat to the US dollar in mid-2001) have continued to deter investors, even as the country’s doors have opened. In efforts to punish the regime for its human rights record and failure to transfer power to elected officials, the European Union, the United States and some other countries have imposed limited economic sanctions. Overseas divestment campaigns by activists have resulted in consumer boycotts and selective purchasing agreements in some states and cities aimed at pressuring foreign investors to leave the country until substantial changes have taken place.

Among average Burmese, economic mismanagement has had disastrous consequences. For many, simply finding enough to eat on a daily basis is the primary concern. Estimates in 1996 by international organizations put the average monthly incomes between 2,000 kyat for rural populations (US$192 at that time) and 3,000 kyat for urban populations (US$288) for 99% of the country, excluding the very wealthy 1% whose income was unknown. In urban poor families, this amounted to barely enough to cover expenses incurred, since in addition to food and rent, many had to buy water and cooking fuel, and spend a large portion of their income on transportation to their workplaces. In 1997, calculations by the government’s Central Statistical Organization and Ministry of Health placed estimates monthly household subsistence requirements at over 8,000 kyat in rural areas and over 9,500 kyat in urban centers, with average expenditures considerably higher at 13,000 and over 15,000 kyat respectively. Although no corresponding estimates for later years are available, since wages have not kept up with inflation, it is unlikely the average family’s purchasing power has increased.

WORLD BANK REPORT

In November 1999, the World Bank released a highly critical assessment of economic mismanagement under the junta, highlighting growing debt, contracting foreign investment, rising inflation, inadequate social spending, and the “dollarization” of the economy as causes of poverty in the country. Originally a draft intended for discussion purposes, prior to the composition and release of a more formal document, copies were initially circulated to a select audience, and later widely leaked. Although the report is based largely on the government’s own data, the SPDC objected to the report’s conclusions, and to date a final version, which was to be produced following consultation with the government, has yet to be released. The report’s major finding is that the economic “growth” achieved in Burma over the past decade has not improved overall access to employment, or enhanced human development or poverty reduction. This echoes what activists have been saying for years: that resources are not equitably distributed among the population, and that investment benefits only a tiny elite.

Almost one in four households, or 23 million people, live below the minimum subsistence levels. If those whose levels of spending are not significantly above (10% or less) minimum subsistence are included among the poor, the estimated incidence of poverty jumps to about one in three households.

- World Bank

The report recommends sweeping changes, including redress of the current macro-economic imbalances, reform of agricultural policies that squander social capital and hurt the environment, private sector development, increased delivery of social services in cooperation with NGOs, with particular attention to health, nutrition, and primary education, and civil service reform.
FOOD SCARCITY

The Government of Myanmar remains totally pledged to the achievement of food security for all.
- Statement of the SPDC at the World Food Summit, March 1998

In my country, the famine is silent. It is destroying Arakan. Everywhere there is lack of food and lack of work. If you are starving, you won’t even get 7 kg. of rice from your neighbours because they are also hungry.

Throughout the 1990s, food scarcity has been growing in agrarian areas of Burma where food was once plentiful. While state land confiscation, combined with crop procurement and taxation policies, is crushing for rural farmers who produce for their own sustenance, urban dwellers are also badly affected. In 1994, 45% of Yangon households fell below the food poverty line, and 72% were not consuming enough calories. The WHO estimated in the mid-1990s that 31.2 to 54.5% of all children were clinically malnourished, exhibiting growth stunting. The World Bank in 1999 found 20% of Burma’s households were unable to provide adequate food for their children from their own resources and should have access to supplementary feeding programs.

In September 1999, the Asian Human Rights Commission released the report of a People’s Tribunal convened to investigate the role of the military in Burma in contributing to food scarcity and insecurity. The Tribunal found that the state prevents people from working to achieve food security by denying them access to land and freedom to choose when and what to cultivate, as well as restricting access to natural resources, especially in zones of armed conflict. The Tribunal criticized the state’s policy of forcibly procuring farmers’ produce, placing government interests above those of ordinary citizens, “regardless of their economic well-being.” Contributing to inflation of food prices, the government’s policies affect people in every part of Burma. The Tribunal concluded that military interests take precedence over civilian development and food security, and these policies continue to be enacted without any democratic involvement of those affected.

The Tribunal further found the government’s relentless militarization (their promotion of military culture and ideology, as opposed to mere “militarism,” the physical appropriation of public resources towards the armed wing of the state) to be the key factor in creating the nation-wide phenomenon of hunger.

FOOD PRICES

[Migrant worker:] We are exiled by the high prices of commodities. CINT 237

In all parts of the country, a disproportionate amount of income is spent on food. Even in 1996, before the economic crash, studies found that families spent on average 65% of their total monthly budget in Rangoon and 71% in Mandalay on food alone. For many women, finding food to put on the table is their primary preoccupation, one for which they usually bear sole responsibility, and a constant source of distress.

As a result of food shortages and economic fluctuation, prices of basic commodities have soared. In 1998, people in diverse areas of the country, including the capital, faced a doubling of food prices, along with chronic shortages of employment. Overall, inflation peaked at 68% in 1998. Some poor urban areas also saw an average 35% increase in the price of basic foodstuffs during 1999. The price of rice, the staple food throughout the country, is reported to have nearly doubled in this two-
year period, from 100 kyat or less per pyi \textsuperscript{23} for good quality rice in 1998 to 180-190 kyat in October 1999 in Rangoon. In parts of the country where little rice is grown and transportation drives costs up, prices can be much higher than the average, especially when fuel prices rise. While rice prices in most areas stabilized or fell in 2000, inflation still averaged 20% in some areas. Chronic instability in the kyat, which plummeted from an exchange rate of 400 per US dollar during 2000 to over 700 per US dollar in May 2001, stimulated further increases in consumer prices during the first half of 2001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AVERAGE PRICE INCREASES</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2001</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RICE (low – high quality, 1 pyi)</td>
<td>65 - 100 kyat</td>
<td>150 – 200 kyat</td>
<td>120 - 180 kyat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHICKEN (1 viss)</td>
<td>600 kyat</td>
<td>900 - 1,200 kyat</td>
<td>1,400 kyat</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Since a family of four will easily eat a pyi of rice per day, and daily labour wages average 150 kyats for women to 200 kyats for men, in families with only one wage-earner, nearly all income may be spent on rice alone. Increasingly, particularly in poorer urban areas, women borrow to cover daily expenses such as food. In some areas, families are forced to sell possessions such as jewelry, cooking pots and clothing in order to buy enough to eat. In peri-urban townships like Hlaingthayar, sometimes women even sell their hair, something they can obviously do only infrequently; and still, most receive only 200 kyat per time. (CINT 260) In communities like this in late 1999, rice consumption in some families had fallen to 60-65% of the usual dietary intake, and children were showing signs of clinical malnutrition. Where daily wages are insufficient to purchase food regularly, some families had been reduced to eating one meal of rice every two to three days. (CINT 246)

My husband died one year ago, so now I am alone with my children. Each day, from my shop, I get about 400 or 500 kyat. One kilo of rice is 150 kyat and we need 1 ? kilos for each meal. So we have to eat just rice and vegetables. CINT 38

I think the government has a responsibility to reduce food prices. What are they doing in this country? In the past, we could buy many things to eat, but now it seems like some of these things are now forbidden, because they’re so expensive, we no longer know what they taste like. I don’t mean we want luxuries, just quality goods and services, especially health care and food. We need greater equality between the rich people and us ordinary people. CINT 70

As I have a big family, it was hard to survive in Burma. Of course, we could survive if we would have more than 1000 kyat in daily income. The price of one pyi of rice (1 pyi= 8 milk cans) is 120 kyats for the lowest quality, and 1/10 viss (equivalent to approximately 350 grams) of cooking oil is about 60 kyats. We ate a sour soup with leaves and a bean salad with rice every day and that cost about 300 or 400 kyat. This is all we could afford. CINT 194

In many families, a couple’s combined income is 200 kyat a day, but the price of a pyi of rice is also 200 kyat a day, so the money is just come and gone again. CINT 242

We have a family of four, me, my husband and my two children. So if we make 30,000 kyat per month, it’s just enough. CINT 216
Clearly, unless many families are able to fulfill their needs through foraging or non-purchase exchanges, as is sometimes true in rural areas, most households must have a minimum of three to four wage-earners in order to make ends meet. This often means that children as young as seven or eight and older people in their sixties and seventies are also required to contribute to the family income. The total remittance income from family members employed in other countries is undocumented but believed to be an essential contribution to many families' survival. It is under these conditions that women in numbers have joined Burma's work force.

**DECISION-MAKING & THE FAMILY INCOME**

Women control 80% of the household finances in Burma. They understand very well what is needed for the household, and can apply this knowledge to other fields – health, medicine, clothing, food, finance — because they deal with all these things. But in the past most didn't work because they need to spend a lot of time caring for their children and especially worrying about their children's education. CINT 91

Women are dominated by men. Men think that women must take all the responsibilities for the family and that women should listen to whatever they say. Even if a woman is knowledgeable and educated, she does not have the same free hand as a man to decide on a matter. We women have to think of the domestic affairs and everything. Being male, men never want to accept any advice from women and reject it easily. CINT 276

It has been said that traditionally in Burma, women hold the purse-strings, and men hand over all their income to their wives. This division of decision-making roles has been used to rationalize women's diminished presence in the public sphere; it is said that because women are in charge of the household, they do not wish to be in charge elsewhere. Traditional patterns are now changing as more women do paid work. When we asked women who makes the decisions regarding household income and spending, the answers they gave varied widely. In some families, women controlled nearly all the financial decision-making, including property transactions and major purchases, while in others, they received a portion of their husband's earnings for daily expenses and otherwise had little input as to where the rest of the money went. In a few situations, most decisions were jointly made and money jointly held.

In all these cases, it still appears common that women bear responsibility for day-to-day household management and decisions about spending for food, and that they make most of the daily purchases. At the same time, exercising control over household finances is not necessarily seen as a privilege. Rather, it is often perceived as a burden, as it remains the woman's responsibility to make ends meet, whether the amount of money allotted to her is sufficient or not.

In my family when I was growing up, my father made most of the big decisions. But when there were hard times with money, not enough money, my mother had to manage things. CINT 280

My father is very quiet. He gives his salary to my mother and is not concerned whether this money is enough for the family. If we need extra income, my mother and sisters solve this problem. If we have problems at home, my sisters and my mother tackle them. My father sometimes gets involved for very important decisions. CINT 223

Women in families where men were the primary wage-earners and income was scarce sometimes complained that they had no control over how the male members of their family spent their earnings. When women work primarily in the home, they may have no source of income apart from their husbands' or other family members' earnings. If earnings are spent on alcohol, drugs or gambling rather than foodstuffs or other necessities, women and their children suffer. In our interviews and in unpublished studies by NGOs working in Burma, insufficient household income figures as a contributor to domestic violence. In refugee camps, the situation is sometimes particularly acute as refugees have very few income-earning opportunities and many needs that, because of host governments' restrictions, are left unfulfilled by relief aid. Men sometimes sell the family's rice rations to buy drugs or alcohol, however women are reportedly reticent to complain, as arguments may escalate to physical violence. (CINT 103, CINT 234) 18

In our village [in Mon State], the women sell the fish in the market, but the men control the money. CINT 276

When there is a quarrel, it is often because of money, because life is economically difficult. A woman asks money from her husband and he is unable or unwilling to give it to her, so she argues. This often degenerates into a fight.
You know, if the woman really controls the money, she would have no reason to argue!  CINT 135

In the Muslim community, men ask us women to sell vegetables. When we do that, we give our money to our husbands, and they do as they like with it. If we give it to our husbands and they buy alcohol, the money is less. When a woman asks for the money, her husband gets angry and may beat her. If it is like that, and the woman tells the leaders in the Muslim community, the leaders say, “Unity. We must work together. It is your family’s problem.” CINT 235

Among the urban poor, there is a lot of alcohol abuse and alcoholism is increasing. Alcohol is cheaper than food, and in Hlaingthaya, some men buy booze, instead of rice for their families. The consequence of this is that women are responsible for earning extra income to keep the family together. CINT 254

At the same time, women in financially contingent positions often have little power to extricate themselves from untenable situations or to change their husbands’ behaviour. Assertions that, because of the traditional arrangements in Burmese families, women do not need their own income deserve reassessment in light of these problems.

**CULTURAL STEREOTYPES & WORK**

Cultural stereotypes regarding work are closely tied to social norms that identify women as mothers and homemakers. This bias is reflected in the types of work outside of housework and farming that women in Burma traditionally do. Since the colonial period women have worked in the civil service, forming the majority of the country’s nurses and teachers at all levels. They have also long been engaged in trade, primarily of foodstuffs and household goods, and laboured in industries such as textiles. Less predictably, women have also monopolized cheroot production, a major industry in Shan State and central Burma. While women from among the educated elite have also worked in the fields of publishing, law and economics, on the whole they have comprised a small minority.

On the whole, the belief that if the extra income is not needed, women should be in the home, is widespread.

Men think women are only good for taking care of the house and the children.  CINT 18

My husband doesn’t want me to work as a farmer, he wants me to stay home and cook, and he goes to work.  CINT 31

My husband doesn’t want me to work, he wants me to cook and clean. If I work he complains and says, “Why do work, don’t I provide enough for you?” He doesn’t like me to work.... The government likes women to stay home and clean and cook and take care of their husbands. They want men to work outside the house.  CINT 35

We girls helped our mother with the cooking and housework while the boys worked with our father in the rice field. In households with no boys, the girls worked in the fields. CINT 62

The boys also help the family, but the girls do more. The boys’ duty is to go to school and get an education, but the girls’ job is to take care of the household. The boys help, but they don’t have much time because they also have to do their homework, so they can become educated people. CINT 90

In Karen culture, we [women] stay in the house. We are told by the older generations to do like this, and our parents order it, so we have to stay in the house.... CINT 235

My husband told me to quit work after we married. He did not let me weave any more, I just stayed home and did the cooking and washing. He said that if his wife worked, she would earn money and start to influence him. CINT 236

With a culture of extended family habitation and few daycare facilities or homes for the aged, women are also primarily responsible for the care of children and older relatives. At times living together with other relatives often works to women’s benefit. According to one estimate, while private and informal services also exist, public daycare facilities are available to only about 50,000 children, mostly in urban areas. Some employed mothers depend on other family members, often their own mothers or sisters, for childcare. Many rely on their oldest children, most frequently older daughters, to take care of younger ones.

However, for others, taking care of young children precludes their participation in wage-earning activities outside the home. Because of this, women engage primarily in work that can be done from the home or close to it: running small goods shops, sewing, and making sweets and snacks for sale at nearby markets or schools. As most working women still bear the full burden of household labour, this arrangement allows women to simultaneously un-
The Economy & Women’s Labour

Most women around the world undertake many tasks, something that characterizes women’s work the world over. It also means that women often work more hours than men per day, and have very little leisure time.

Overwhelmingly, even when they are employed outside the home or in income-generating enterprises based in the home, women do most of the housework, shopping for food, cooking, cleaning, and sometimes the making or mending of clothes for the family as well. When extended families live together, household tasks may be shared among the members, but it is still most common for the female members, daughters, aunts, grandmothers, and older sisters, to do the bulk of the domestic work. This appears to be true both in rural and urban communities. Because many homes in Burma, including those in urban settings, lack modern amenities such as piped water or machines, such chores may include carrying water, cutting or gathering firewood for cooking, threshing unhusked paddy, washing and mending clothes by hand, and feeding domestic animals. Especially when women have many children in close succession, childcare and housework are a full-time job.

While stereotypes are changing among younger generations, housework is still considered the women’s domain, and it is rare to find households where tasks are shared equally, even when women are also employed outside the home.

There are some men, who like to carry the kids around. Some fathers, when they have time, are very affectionate, and when they do have time, they like to come home and carry the kids around... You do see that. But major things, being with the children all day, feeding, bathing them, mostly women do that. Women do the cooking and cleaning. You rarely see a Burmese guy in the kitchen. You rarely see a Burmese guy going to the market buying groceries. You rarely see a Burmese guy washing all the clothes for the family. It’s mostly women. If you’re really lucky, you might have a man who washes his own clothes. CINT 99

If a man is married he might cut firewood or look after the children, but very rarely. On the contrary, we can say generally that [Chin] men never help. Only if their wives are sick and there are no daughters there – then men must do things. CINT 169

Different generations of women in Burma sometimes have very different attitudes towards the traditional division of labour. While older women are more likely to accept their place in the household, arguing that they benefit from role specialization which does not require them to earn a salary, younger women sometimes find the traditional roles constraining, and would prefer greater freedom of choice in their work inside and outside the home.

It’s the custom the women should stay in the house, and the men look after them. But I don’t really like it. I think nowadays, everybody can do a job or something like that. My male friends said we can’t do anything about this. This is [the way things have been] from a long time ago. But I think we have to change by ourselves. We need change. CINT 78

Few women in Burma currently have the luxury of choosing their field of employment or deciding whether or not to do paid work. For most, finding a source of income is simply an economic necessity. However, for those in the upper echelons of Burmese society who work outside because they want a career, being married and having children are considered impediments, since they restrict the kind of work women can do and decrease their chances of promotion. Married women who choose to work outside the home are also subjected to the pressures of both their own and others’ expectations, often feeling they must prove that they still give sufficient attention to their families. In a series of essays written for the UN Decade for Women in 1975, Daw Khin Myo Chit noted,

With the keen competition around [a working woman] has to try hard to hold onto her job, and at the same time keep house as good as any woman who stays at home. This is important, because any lapse in housework would mean that she neglects her family just because she enjoys her job.25

These obligations appear to have altered little in intervening years, according to the professional women we spoke with.

Both women and men work, but you see few women in management positions. The general attitude is that women should give more priority to their family than to their career. If a
promotion is offered but entails more travel away from home, for instance, they should not accept it and leave their children behind. It is primarily the mother’s responsibility to keep the family together, when looking at employment they have to keep that in mind much more so than men. For men it is easier and more acceptable to work elsewhere and live away from their family. CINT 254

They choose the man for the high position. In their minds, they think a man can work more than a woman. Women have their families. There will be things to do for the kids. Men do not have many of those things to do. I think that’s why they choose men over women even if they are of the same education level. Men can do all kinds of jobs. If the job requires going to the districts, they choose men. Women cannot go. Women are always associated with their families and taking care of their families. That’s difficult for women. Men have better opportunities. CINT 93

Women are also dissuaded from taking professional jobs that require them to work away in areas distant from their homes or relocate to other places.

Rangoon is a big city but there’s not much work, so most people who work as engineers will be transferred to smaller towns and villages in the field area. For example civil engineers, there’s not much work for them in the cities. Even if we graduate in economics, sometimes we have to go to work in other towns as civil servants. We can’t easily get jobs in cities like Rangoon and Mandalay, and nowadays is even more difficult. Most parents want their daughters to stay in the same city, because they are worried. Even their brothers are so worried about the girls in the family, because they see them as vulnerable. Women can be attacked by men or bad people, so they should be protected at home and by society till they get married. So this is a problem. CINT 94

The gender divisions between “men’s work” and “women’s work” are exemplified by women’s dominance in the field of trade. Traditionally, it was believed that men’s supposed spiritual superiority entitled them to the loftier pursuits which office and administrative work were said to entail. Women were left to deal with the more mundane aspects of life, including buying and selling, which necessarily involve competition and profit, concepts anathema to Buddhism. Daw Khin Myo Chit describes the scenario in many middle-class families during the post-war period.

What usually happened was that the wife earned more from her home snack kiosk than her husband did at the office, since the salaries could no longer keep pace with the rocketing inflation. “The man of the family goes to the office to earn — not money, but the neighbours’ respect!”... became a popular epigram.

Even though conditions for government workers in particular have changed dramatically, and corruption is rife throughout Burma, the same preconceptions are still at work in popular understanding.

My father just stays at home because he says women are better at selling things. CINT 160

Women can do business. A lot of women are agents, buying and selling, cars, gems, jewellery, clothes... that kind of thing. I think it’s because some men think that buying and selling is beneath them. So they deserve to be in a government office and getting the prestige, while the women really make money by doing business which is a little bit “dirtier” than that. But nowadays, office jobs are also dirty too, you squeeze out money from people who approach you, so nothing is clean any more. But there’s still prestige attached to getting a job at a stable office. CINT 99

Men usually get ashamed easier than women, because most men are not familiar with trading, and they can’t go to the places like women can go. Women can make more money from selling things. Particularly among the ethnic groups, more women can be selling things than men. Also men dare not ask people to get jobs the way women try to find jobs. Women can ask people in any worksite, “Is any job available for me?” or “Can I get a job here?” something like that. CINT 200

My husband is not able to do his political work anymore, but I don’t think he could earn a living like I have been doing, in weaving or trade. Most politicians and monks can’t do the hard work after they retire. CINT 198

Many fields remain completely male-dominated. It is unheard-of for women to work as drivers of long-distance transport vehicles or of public buses and taxis, postal delivery workers, or firefighters. There are very few women in the civil police force or the armed forces. Women cannot work as sailors, either in the Navy or the merchant marines. There are also specific areas where employment of women is prohibited, including aviation, mining, off-shore and on-shore petroleum development, and logging. A common rationale given is that these occupations are too physically taxing or “rough” to be done by women; however given the number of women who
work in other strenuous labour, for example doing farming, construction or carrying goods for trade, this reasoning is not defensible.

For women, we can’t be taxi drivers and stuff, I wish I could be a taxi driver, they have so much freedom! They are their own bosses. That would be completely outrageous, no woman could drive a taxi, for cultural reasons, because no woman has done it before. CINT 99

[In northern Burma] the men all go to the jade mines or gold mines. The women become teachers or nurses. There are no other jobs for women. No one would take a woman to work in the mines. CINT 120

It is also considered inappropriate or risky for women to work closely with men under certain conditions, for example late at night or with little supervision, apparently because in these situations, women are seen to be sexually vulnerable. Factories and foreign companies in Burma frequently require employees to work overtime until very late at night, and are hence are not considered to be good places for women, particularly young women, to work. Some places also require employees to live in dormitories on the factory premises, exposing women to real and perceived risks of harassment.

Social norms in Burma restrict the movement of girls and women, so there are fewer opportunities for them. It’s not good for a girl to go out and work at night. This year we heard that restaurants have been ordered not to hire women as waitresses. This is because the government would like to stop women from going into sex work. CINT 77.

Waitresses are looked down upon. Once I worked as a maître d’ [hotel], in a Burmese restaurant overseas, and my mother told my relatives, and they said, “She’ll be pinched!” So waitresses are not “good people” in Burma. CINT 99

There are some fishing companies like Ye Khu company in the region [coastal Mon State], and they need clerks. The government doesn’t monitor that company. But I don’t want to work there because it isn’t good for women. We have to stay together with the men who work at the company. Especially at night, most of the workers are men. So I’m aware that it’s dangerous for women. Men like to take advantage of women’s weakness. If a woman works with many men in the same place, the neighbours will gossip about her. I don’t want that. CINT 280

In Burma when we talk about “companies,” we mean a large foreign joint-venture, Singaporean, Chinese, American, or maybe a business owned by a cease-fire group like the Wa. We don’t call family businesses “companies.” To get a job in a company, first you need connections, but also we think that for young women they are – how shall I put it? – not a good place to work. They are not sincere. Because there are many stories of women being harassed by their employers or the people they work with. And in this case, what can the women do? Jobs, especially ones that pay well, are hard to find. So we don’t want our daughter working at a place like that. CINT 161

A criticism often made of the various kinds of work currently available to women in the formal and informal sectors is that they are culturally inappropriate. A great number of the positions available to young women are seen to be sexually exploitative: because they expose women to predatory advances by men in positions of greater authority, because women are required to rely on their physical appearance and comport themselves in a way that entices men, or because the product purveyed in some cases is sex. Complaining about how prevailing gender discrimination affects employment opportunities, some women we spoke with referred to the growth of direct and indirect venues proffering sex, including brothels, massage parlors, karaoke bars, nightclubs, and positions where women promote alcohol or beer sales. However, private companies and even department stores were often included in the list of establishments that exploit women. At the same time, these various types of work provide women with economic independence and a chance to contribute to their family’s earnings they otherwise would not have.

Right now survival is the most important thing. If my parents back home knew what I was doing, they wouldn’t allow it. They are so conservative. I would be sent home. Now I can stay in a dormitory with other friends who are working in shops or as dish-washers or anything they can find in Rangoon. I’m proud that I can stand on my own two feet and support myself. I have my own money and freedom, and I couldn’t have these if I were up-country. No one here is curious about how I make my money. My friends and neighbours are supportive and understanding. They don’t look down on me for selling beer. I still want to improve my life and earn a professional skill, but I don’t know how I can find a way. CINT 76

It is quite certain that economic change has created turbulence in value systems in Burma. Women working in a wide range of positions is still a novelty, and there are very real reasons for concern that women...
are unable to enjoy full labour rights under the present circumstances. Sexual harassment on the job is a genuine fear for many women, and is not acceptable under any circumstances. However, what constitutes exploitation is more nebulous and less universal. While greater employment options and guarantees of labour rights are necessary to ensure women their rights to work with dignity, protectionist attitudes that aim to keep women from harm by keeping them from working will only serve to further undermine their self-determination. With employment opportunities already scarce, cultural restrictions on the work that women can do further reduce women’s chances for economic independence and reinforce their contingent positions.

**RURAL WOMEN**

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood, in circumstances beyond [her] control.

- Article 25 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Finding work has always been a problem since before our grandmothers’ time and before. It has always been a day-to-day struggle to feed yourself and your family, without any job security. CINT 01

Most of Burma’s women live in rural areas. According to government figures, 72% of Burma’s population is agrarian, not accounting for the 2 to 10% of people who are internally displaced or migrate for labour. (CINT 255) World Bank surveys show that 70% of the country’s poor also live in rural areas, implying a large overlap. The largest numbers of poor live in the country’s rice-growing central region comprising Sagaing, Bago (Pegu), Magway, Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy), and Mandalay divisions; however the most severe poverty is experienced in Chin and Karenni States and Magway Division. Agriculture is believed to account for 35% of export earnings, with 64% of the workforce employed directly in farming, although government statistics on land-use and crop yields are thought to be often inaccurate. Most farmers grow rice, through either wet paddy or hillside slash and burn rice cultivation, with the primary aim of feeding themselves, selling the surplus to provide cash for other goods. Until recently, in extremely remote hill areas, some villagers still relied on a non-cash economy. Mechanized farming is prohibitively expensive and sometimes unsuited to the topography; so most work is done by hand, and farmers must walk to their fields from nearby villages. Many women hire themselves out to work fields owned by other people, often as seasonal labourers during the planting and harvesting times.

**GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURES ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

The SPDC claims to be developing rural areas through the Border Areas Development Program. However frequent articles and pictures in the state newspaper, The New Light of Myanmar, suggest that their investments consist mostly of capital expenditures in the building of bridges, roads, and other infrastructure, often with greater benefits for the military than local communities. Schools and hospitals built are often not supplied with staff and materials and stand derelict. The government committed only 336.9 million kyat (approximately US$ 1 million) to border areas development in 1999, and of that, very little appears to have been put into programs to improve and extend the quality of existing services. The government has together with partner NGOs and UN agencies begun some general programs for development of rural areas. They include training of midwives, improvement of primary health care and education, AIDS prevention, extension of water and sanitation services, and provision of small-scale micro-credit projects in various townships of the central dry zone and border regions. Reportedly there is sometimes great competition between villages to attract model micro-credit schemes, evidence of the considerable desire for these projects. However, at present, the capacity of these programs to reach women in situations of greatest need is limited. It should be noted that no safety net of social security benefits exists for rural poor women, in particular single women, widowed and divorced mothers and elderly women, many of whom can no longer rely on the traditional extended family assistance to meet their basic needs.
living and working conditions, and secondly by government policies, which, while not gender-specific, directly affect farmers' ability to survive.

**Development & Basic Needs**

Even in agricultural activities, it is usually the men who volunteer to participate. NGOs need to make a special effort to ensure women's participation — if we don't insist, only men turn up. If both men and women participate in village meetings, it is usually the men who do all the talking. CINT 258

Burma ranks 118 out of 163 countries on the UNDP's Gender-related Development Index, compared with neighbouring Thailand at 40. In Burma, as in many countries, rural women are relatively more disadvantaged in terms of access to resources than most urban women. While diminished access to resources in rural areas affects both women and men, girls and boys, lack of primary infrastructure combined with cultural notions of women's work put a greater burden of labour on women. Many women and girls must live without adequate access to facilities supplying basic needs such as food, secure shelter, potable water and adequate sanitation, health care or education. (See Women's Health and Education for Women and Girls.) At the same time, women are traditionally not perceived as community decision-makers, and thus their voices are rarely heard regarding these matters that concern them.

Chronic underdevelopment is especially apparent in northern Karen State, Karenni State, Kachin State, the Naga Hills of Sagaing Division, and Chin State, where much of the infrastructure dates from the colonial period. These mountainous peripheral regions have been the sites of much of the armed conflict over the last ten years, and are poorly serviced by roads. They are also often areas where severe climatic conditions, including extremes of temperature and heavy monsoon rains, make survival most difficult to begin with. Parts of the central dry zone, which experiences frequent droughts, are also critically in need of essential community services. Under prevailing conditions, women must work harder to provide for the needs of their families, at risk to their health.

Less than half of the rural population has access to safe drinking water, and slightly more than a third has proper sanitation. Many villages lack sanitation facilities entirely and water is available only from streams. Across wide areas of the central dry zone and periphery, there is only one common well per village, and water supplies becomes scarce in dry season. Women and girls are often responsible for the time-consuming task of fetching water for daily use over long distances, an activity that results in injuries including strains and trauma from falls.

It is almost always the women who collect the water. It's women's work. CINT 74

The supply of electricity is unreliable even in major cities, and the central grid supplies only 2% of Burma's 65,000 villages, where light is provided mostly by kerosene lamps, and power by privately owned gasoline generators in the villages that can afford them. As a result, most work is done by hand and while light permits, often leaving women with little leisure time during daylight hours.

In rural and many urban areas, wood and charcoal are the most common cooking fuels, increasing the risk of fire in communities ill-equipped to respond to such emergencies. Wood-smoke blackens the interiors of typically small rural kitchens, causing respiratory and
other illnesses in women and young children constantly exposed to the fumes. Women are often responsible for collecting firewood, an activity that results in deforestation and consequent environmental deterioration, and sometimes also puts them at risk of harassment by locally stationed soldiers.

Conflict Areas

There is a war being fought which makes it hard to earn a living so I came to Thailand. I've been here for over three months and I've heard that at the end of this month all of us will be taken to a refugee centre. I still don't know what I'll do if that really happens; I don't know if it would be better to go there or to return to Burma. I can't decide. I would like now just to get a little work, enough to buy food to live on. CINT 152

Throughout border areas populated primarily by ethnic minority groups, ongoing civil war, a dearth of government programs, and active attempts to sequester and starve out the armed opposition, under a policy instituted in the 1970s known as the “Four Cuts”, have impoverished large numbers of people. In conflict areas, where female-headed households are common, women's survival and that of their families is compromised by direct threats, as well as the dilemmas they face balancing their own needs against the demands of soldiers.

The men in the village started running away to escape portering last year, and it has continued up until now. SPDC soldiers often come and the people often run... We are afraid but we cannot do anything.... If we live in the village we cannot survive because all the money we have earned working goes to fees and taxes. CINT 52

[We've been in hiding] since nine months ago [March 1997], because the Burmese persecuted us until we dared not stay in our village.... [M]y husband was shot to death when he went to find rice for us, because we couldn't farm.... As for me, my children were too young to work so my friends gave me some of their rice. If they didn't give me any rice, we would have died, because I couldn't find any food by myself. 34

My husband was killed by the SPDC soldiers and I am left with my four children. I don't have my own field, so I work other people's fields as a daily labourer. It is the hardest time I have ever faced. CINT 222

During May 1994, 800 men disappeared [when they were taken by the army], when RSO and ARIF [rebel armies] crossed the border and entered the South of Maungdaw Township. There was a big fight in the jungle with the Burmese Army. Some died, some were captured and some returned. Those captured were murdered. The army was rounding up people suspecting them of connection with the insurgents. Many women were left alone, became widows and their children orphans. So, they have no other way for to support themselves than begging. CINT 177

My husband raised and traded cattle. We finally earned enough to buy two oxen and a bullock cart for ourselves. Then there was a battle near our village. We fled in the bullock cart with our children and our things. But when we arrived near the border, we had no food for the cattle, so we had to sell them very cheaply. With that money we got enough to hire a car to take us to the refugee camp. CINT 67

 Forced Relocation

Throughout Burma, communities have been forcibly displaced from their land, leaving farmers with no way of earning a living. Often relocated people are forced to sell their possessions in order to survive, however many flee on such short notice that they must leave behind everything they own, including their livestock. Whether they hide in the forest or seek refuge over the border, displaced people must struggle to survive.

My village was relocated to Kholam village. I escaped to Thailand because in Kholam it was very difficult for me to make a living. The soldiers didn't allow us to go more than two kilometers outside of the village, and those who did were killed because they were suspected of supporting the Shan rebel group. I couldn't find a job. CINT 21

We have had to run to the jungle and hide many times to escape the fighting. Last time, we fled to the jungle because the troops came to our village and set landmines all around it. They occupied my house. Our relatives sent food to us. We fixed a time and a place to meet them. When the food was gone, we asked them to send us more. CINT 50

Karen people in villages in Burma are poorer than refugees. In Burma if you stay like refugees, you will starve, because with no land, you will eat only bamboo shoots. CINT 269

Crop Procurement & Taxation

Government policies directly undercut the capacity of the country's food producers to feed themselves. Productive fields and orchards, the primary sources
of villagers’ food, are regularly confiscated by local battalions for army use. Farmers are also obliged to sell their rice and other produce to the authorities at prices far below the market value under the compulsory crop procurement policy. In some areas, farmers must give half their total harvest. (CINT 42) Most seized produce is used to provide rations for government soldiers. Tatmadaw troops stationed in contested areas often do not receive adequate rations and raid villages, stealing or demanding rice and domestic animals. The burdens on villagers increase when they are also required to provide food to ethnic insurgent armies.

If we earned money as labourers then we had to pay tax to the Burmese. We were forbidden to sell our agricultural produce to anyone except the Burmese soldiers and they paid very low prices. CINT 149

My family used to have a six acre field. Then my father died. He had bought the field, but when he died, the government took the field back, even though my mother and us children were still alive. We went to the court many times and paid a lot of money that we borrowed in bribes. Finally they asked us to wait for one month for some kind of paper. After much longer than one month, the paper came, but it said we could not have the field. Instead, authorities took it. My mother owes a lot of people money because we had to borrow so much for the bribery. CINT 264

We owned our own land, but we had to give almost half of the production every year – twelve baskets of rice per acre – to the government. CINT 39

Even though we harvest the crops, it is still not sufficient to pay the taxes they are subject to. We have to give eight pyi per week. So, we have to buy from others to supplement the produce. If it does not rain, the production goes down. Since we live in town, we don’t go for forced labour, but instead the authorities ask us to give them money and other things all the time. Now we are even thinking about quitting cultivation. It is barely enough for us to survive. CINT 238

We grew groundnuts [peanuts], but we had to sell them secretly because the government wanted them, but they paid such a low price. We got 25 kyat per tin from the government, but 55 to 60 if we sold them outside. My husband used to work at the township level, and he also had to keep a list of all the fields and supervise the collection of rice for the government, eight baskets per acre from each field in our township.... After my husband left, sometimes I had no money to feed my children, so I would sell one of our pigs or cows, or sell parts of our rice fields. If the authorities knew I got some money and could buy things, they would come and interrogate me. CINT 275

If you are a widow, and the DKBA asks for taxes, you must give the taxes the same as women with husbands. One of my aunts has no husband, and she and her two daughters work on the farm. Even though she works very hard, SLORC and DKBA ask for taxes and she has no rice to eat. She had to come to stay in Thailand as a refugee. CINT 269

Heavy taxation and confiscation of land and food crops have resulted in starvation in some areas. Many people have crossed the borders to seek refuge in neighbouring countries not because they are in the path of conflict, but because under the demands of the government army and local officials, they are unable to feed themselves. At the same time, these conditions are ultimately the product of civil war and military rule. Unfortunately, the countries that are home to the majority of refugees from Burma, Thailand and India, are not signatories to the 1953 Convention on Refugees, and even those fleeing fighting are in a precarious position as regards their status. Those who are unable to survive under the SPDC regime’s rural area policies but cannot prove a well-founded fear of persecution are at risk of being termed “economic migrants” rather than refugees and face possible deportation.

Farming

Throughout Burma, many farmers do not own the land they work.35 A UNDP-funded Human Development Baseline Survey in 1997 of over 20,000 rural households in various parts of the country found that one third owned no land. Among land-holding farmers, it estimated that over 60% owned less than five acres, the minimum generally required for subsistence, although regional variations throughout the country are significant. With existing weak infrastructure, it is difficult to expand credit and training programs to reach the most isolated rural poor in upland border areas, whose situation at present is most precarious.36

Those in rural areas who do not have landholdings usually work as tenant farmers or seasonal hired labourers. Under the traditional division of labour, women plant and harvest, while men plough. In fact, in many communities, women do most of the
same work that men do in the fields, as well as the bulk of the domestic work. Consequently while children and sometimes husbands may help with the household tasks, mothers typically work the longest hours of any family members. The lack of services takes a heavy toll on women’s health and greatly inhibits their leisure activity and opportunity for personal development.

The women do more work. We have to get up really early. Usually we get up at 3 a.m. Every day! We collect water from the government distribution, then if we don’t get that water, we go down the hill to get it. After that, we have to do the kitchen work including pounding the rice and cooking. After that, we come with the men to the fields. Sometimes we call the old women to take care of the children while we work with the men clearing the fields. Also we have to cut the long grass for roofing and when the work is done, we collect firewood, then come home. Everyday we need to collect firewood. Even though we try hard the government didn’t provide us with anything, and they asked many things from us. CINT 74

In our Kachin tradition, the women do everything. The women go to the paddy field, and early morning we have to wake up and pound the rice and cook the rice, and after that the men get up. This kind of lifestyle is fixed in the minds of many Kachin women.

When they walk to the paddy fields, the women have to lead the way, carry the children, and carry other things as well. And when come back from the paddy fields or work, the women have to carry the children, and others have to carry firewood. The men only carry their hunting rifles. And when the women arrive, they have to cook, wash, they have to feed the pigs, to do everything. The men can come back and sleep. Even now, most of the Kachin men will not go into the kitchen. They won’t cook, they won’t wash. They just sit in the front room. CINT 112

The only difference [between men and women in Karenni] is that when we clear the land, men cut the trees and women slash the branches of the trees. CINT 233

Karen women work more than men. For the men, they just work in the field. But even in the fields, women work more than men. They do a lot of things, like reap, and thrash, and pound. CINT 264

Usually we cannot plough the fields like the men do. But in our area of Tavoy, women have to plough the fields when their husbands are away. When we plant we work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., 12 hours a day, backbreaking work in the sun. The planting must be finished in a limited time, a plot must be completed in a day. Women suffer from fungal infections on their legs and lower bodies from standing in the water for many hours, and sometimes it leads to urinary tract infections and menstrual problems. This is the hardest time for us. The planting is harder than the ploughing. CINT 276

Normally I got up at 6 a.m. and went to the farm, and I came back at 6 p.m. Since we have a sugarcane farm, I worked for the whole day, ploughing the land with a hoe like a man. It was very hard work. After finishing with the fields I came home and did the housework. CINT 285

People working as day labourers on others’ land are sometimes paid in money and other times in produce. Most women farmers do not receive wages for work on family plots, however other employment opportunities are sometimes virtually non-existent. In some areas, women may work as traders travelling to other places. In larger towns and villages, women sell food in markets or house to house. It is common in some areas for women, particularly Muslim women, to run family tea-shops, where tea, coffee, and popular Burmese snacks such as samosas, donuts or noodle dishes are served, however opening a shop requires first having sufficient capital. Most of the women we spoke with from rural areas maintained that women had very few ways of earning money.

Where I lived in Shan State, men worked in the fields and women mostly worked in the orchards. I wasn’t paid in
wages, but in food. If you could grow a little food on the mountain yourself, you could survive. CINT 11

I didn’t have any opportunity to do another kind of work, besides working in the fields. Also for me it was difficult to go away from the family for work, partly because they would worry about me, and also because I had to help them, so I couldn’t work in another place. CINT 90

When I couldn’t find hired work on other people’s land, I made tofu to sell in the village. CINT 153

Women can only grow rice or other crops, make handicrafts and sell things. CINT 158

Most women in my village were farmers, so they earned very little money. My mother could sew so she could make 10 kyat here and there making clothes. Nobody had any specific job that would make money. CINT 221

We just grow paddy and beans, there isn’t any other work. There is only one woman with a sewing machine in our village. We all have debts and would like to be able to make a little money, but we have no way of earning it. CINT 222

**FORCED LABOUR**

The Committee welcomes the Government of Myanmar’s recent order which overruled those provisions of the Towns Act and Village Act that authorized the Government to extract forced labour from women. The Committee considers forced labour of women to be a contemporary form of slavery and a denial of their rights. The Committee, however, is concerned that the Towns Act and the Village Act remains as legislation. It is further concerned that there is little information about the implementation and enforcement of the recent order. The Committee requests the Government to include in its next report more information and data on the process of implementation of the order and recommends that the Government take the action necessary to bring perpetrators to justice.

- **Concluding Observations and Recommendations of the CEDAW Committee**

The Burmese government always threatens us to contribute to community work, to contribute labor to the community. They threaten that if we don’t do that, they will confiscate the farmland. We have no time to work for our own family. They will confiscate that, they’ll confiscate this, they’ll put us in jail. So we have to go against our will to work for them, and we have no time to work on our own farms or fruit orchards, so our families become poorer and poorer. Because of that, the family has so many problems. CINT 112

People’s abilities to support themselves are further undermined by the SPDC’s use of forced unpaid labour, to which one economist in the mid-1990s attributed 3% of the GDP. The use of forced labour is particularly widespread in ethnic areas, where it has become a primary reason for massive outflows of refugees.

In our interviews conducted between 1998 and 2000, women indicated that they were increasingly required to perform forced labour. Conscripted labour is used throughout Burma, including in towns and cities, but is especially prevalent in rural areas, and areas of conflict where men are frequently absent. Women are routinely used for forced labor when men are fighting or seeking work elsewhere, or when they have fled their villages to escape possible torture, execution, forced labour and portering. In many areas, it was previously believed that the army would not take women to porter goods. In recent years, women with infant children who cannot flee their villages when troops approach are among those who regularly perform forced labour, including portering.

We are bitter because of our experiences. Morally, we are strong, but these kinds of things are degrading. If they need wood for fencing, or for cooking, we have to go and cut it. If the military base needs bamboo, we have to go and cut it for them. We have to make bamboo thatch for the walls of the houses. They order villagers to come, at least one per household. Most of them are women, because if the men go and they do something wrong, then they will be tortured. It is compulsory for one person from each household to go. But lately it seems it is also dangerous for women. CINT 111

The women we spoke with related that the forced labour they had done included road work, portering goods and munitions for the army, growing food for the army, constructing barracks, acting as domestic servants for soldiers, working on rubber plantations, farms and other income-generating ventures, maintaining tennis courts and golf-courses for use by the military, clearing ground for construction, and standing sentry duty. Villagers performing forced labour have to bring their own provisions, including food and often tools to worksites, and most are not provided shelter, payment, or medical treatment if they are ill or injured.
THE ILO'S INVESTIGATION INTO FORCED LABOUR

The use of forced labour in Burma has been well-documented for over a decade. Burma is one of the 174 nation-members of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the United Nations-sponsored labour organization, which includes also workers and employers. Since 1955, Burma has been a signatory to the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), which bans the use of forced labour except under very particular circumstances. The Convention defines forced labor as "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself (or herself) voluntarily," regardless of whether or not wages are paid. It stipulates when forced labour is permitted, usually only in cases of emergency, labourers must be men between the ages of 18 and 45 in good health, paid for their work in a safe environment.

In 1997, one of the ILO's largest member organizations, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), brought a formal complaint against Burma under Article 26 of the ILO constitution. Article 26 allows that any State member of the ILO, any delegate to the International Labour Convention, or the Governing Body of the ILO itself can lodge a complaint against a member State for not securing effective application of an ILO Convention it has ratified. The ICFTU argued that the pervasive and persistent use of civilians for forced labour by the ruling government contravened the Forced Labour Convention.

The ILO appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the allegations, a procedure which has only been used a handful of times in the organization's 81 year history. The Commission of Inquiry made extensive investigation of this allegation, inviting submission of evidence by governments, intergovernmental organizations, workers' and employers' organizations, companies mentioned in the complaint, and NGOs. Denied permission by the government to send a mission to Burma to observe conditions first-hand, from 17 to 26 November 1997, the ILO Commission of Inquiry held witness hearings at their headquarters in Geneva. Subsequently in early 1998, the Commission made site visits to areas bordering the country to collect first-hand testimonies of forced labour survivors.

The Article 26 procedure provides that the Commission of Inquiry makes recommendations to the government, to be fulfilled within a specific time frame. Although it has rarely occurred, in the event that the government fails to comply with the recommendations, the ILO can refer the case to the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

In 1998, the Commission of Inquiry released the report of its findings and gave the government a six-month period, later extended, within which to accept or reject its findings and recommendations. It found the regime guilty of using forced labour "in a widespread and systematic manner, with total disregard for the human dignity, safety and health and basic needs of the people of Myanmar." In particular, the report found pervasive use of forced labour in areas of ethnic conflict, where the practice is used to punish and control local populations. The report concurred that women are not spared from particularly onerous forms of labour, such as portering goods for the army.

Female porters were sometimes raped or otherwise sexually abused by soldiers. Porters who walked too slowly were regularly beaten with sticks, punched, kicked, hit with rifle butts, or prodded with bayonets. Porters who were persistently slow, or who were unable to carry their loads because of exhaustion, sickness or injury were often severely beaten and forced to continue, or if this was not possible they were abandoned or killed. In such areas, porters were not usually shot, but were beaten to death, had their throats cut, were thrown from the sides of mountains, were thrown into rivers with their hands tied behind their backs, or were burned alive.

In its recommendations, the ILO advised the government to repeal the Village and Towns Act, which
Permits the use of forced labour; establish and execute penalties against those exploiting forced labour; and halt the practice of forced labour. The SPDC responded to the report by asserting that forced labour is not used in Burma, although there is a long-standing tradition of voluntary labour in the community.

After receiving additional testimony showing the continued use of forced labour in 1999, the ILO met in June 1999 and in an emergency ruling, enacted the harshest penalty possible under its organizational regulations. In a move tantamount to expulsion (which is not provided for under the ILO Constitution), the ILO forbad Burma from receiving any further technical or material aid from the ILO until the SPDC implemented the Commission of Inquiry recommendations. Further to this, on 28 March 2000, the ILO’s governing body invoked a never-before-used ruling under Article 33 of its constitution. It urged other member States to withhold cooperation from Burma and called on the ILO annual conference in June 2000 to take “any such action as it may deem wise and expedient to secure compliance” with its rules, including possible economic sanctions by all of the organization’s 174 members.

The SPDC were given until November 2000 to make good on their commitments or face such further action. On October 27, 2000, they enacted an order banning and penalizing the use of forced labour under Section 374 of the Penal Code. However, as yet they have not repealed the Villages and Towns Act permitting the use of forced labour. Additionally, reports of the use of forced labour in various areas have continued into the year 2001, and as yet, there is no evidence that any penalties have been levied against violators, prompting worker members of the ILO to comment that “the military remained somehow above the law… And until this situation was remedied, forced labour would continue.” At the same time, some analysts have credited the threat of broad international sanctions as one of the key factors in bringing the SPDC to the negotiating table with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. For the first time in October 2001, a high-level team was allowed to enter the country to assess the situation of forced labour. While its preliminary report cited no use of forced labour on infrastructure projects, it did find that forced labour was still being used at military bases. It is hoped that further cooperation may result in the establishment of a long-term ILO presence to monitor the situation.

Portering is particularly demanding as it often involves carrying loads in excess of 30 kilograms along steep mountain paths for days or weeks, with very little food or water, and few rest breaks. Porters are used to carry ammunition and goods in frontline situations in Karen, Karenni and Shan States, where they are at risk of being injured in combat or by landmines. Women from areas where there is no active combat, for example in Chin and Arakan States, are also frequently conscripted to assist troops moving between stationary camps. Porters unable to carry their loads are sometimes killed, and those who return home often suffer from illnesses like malaria or permanent injuries. When women have to stay in the forest or at worksites overnight, guarded by soldiers, they are often raped. In all these situations, there is ample evidence that young girls, pregnant and nursing women, and elderly women have been taken with no regard for their safety or health.

We had to carry the loads and go at the front of the soldiers to the battlefield [where the SPDC troops were fighting the KNU]. Some porters were badly hurt and injured by the landmines and the fighting but they were left and ignored. If they did not see men they took women as porters. The men fled to the jungle. The women usually thought they would not be harmed and tortured the same as men were. If you are caught you must go or pay the money. If you have no money to pay you must go instead.

I came [from Chin State to India] because I had to work as a porter twice a week. I had to go many times. The time I remember was around March 15 or 18 [1998]. My husband had already left to find work. I carried food for the military on my back, 12 tins, and in front, I carried my baby. He was four months old then. I had no place to leave my baby and I was afraid of the soldiers. How I was able to get there, I can’t remember. After I returned, both my son and I were weak and suffering from severe diarrhea. My breasts were
They come to take porters one for each soldier when they go on patrol, to carry bullets and rations, and because they need so many, they take everyone, married women, unmarried women and even pregnant women. The women have to go to give them massage, and to entertain them, with dancing and singing and that type of thing. If a soldier likes a young woman, sometimes he will keep her there and rape her. They order the head of the village to collect the beautiful young girls and send them to the army camp. If the village heads don’t comply they will be punished. CINT 89

I was a porter so many times [in Arakan State], because nobody else from my family could go. I had to carry rice for the army, and sometimes a soldier’s pack. CINT 173

Before we were told to relocate to Shadaw, I was a porter. I carried ammunition and we had to walk all the time. We followed the army from our village to another village, and there was a battle there. They beat us and swore at us, but I couldn’t understand what they were saying, because they swore in Burmese. This girl [13 years old] also went as a porter once. CINT 233

In Tavoy area, there are four SPDC battalions, 402, 403, 404, 405. When all the men run away, only women remain in the villages and they are forced to carry the soldiers’ arms and ammunition during the operations. They cannot run because they have to take care of their children and homes. Most of the women cannot afford to pay money for porters. The army even recruits pregnant women. The female porters are between 12 and 60 years old. During [military] operations, soldiers forced them to walk in front of the column. Some of them died from landmines and some of them became disabled. Especially, in Thayat Chaung township, Lezu, Minn Datt and Taunggyoke villages. The army usually recruit a hundred women at a time. At night, some women are forced to sleep with them. CINT 276

Only in Muslim Rohingya areas of Arakan State, where many women do not customarily leave their houses to work at all, did people report that women were not taken as army porters. Rohingya women do have to do other kinds of forced labour, particularly growing food for soldiers and doing domestic chores at army bases, where women are sometimes raped by supervising soldiers. However, even when they themselves are spared, the impact of forced portering on Rohingya women is devastating, because many women have been effectively widowed when their husbands taken as porters never returned. The status Rohingya women hold in their own communities makes them generally unable to find wage labour and reliant on their own or their husbands’ relatives for support. If their families cannot support them, they often have little choice but to flee as refugees to Bangladesh, where many must beg for their survival.

My husband is dead now. When I was four months pregnant, the NaSaKa [Regional Command] caught my husband, blindfolded him and took him away. One month later, the NaSaKa sent someone to my house and gave me my husband’s clothes. He said he was dead without any other explanation. After that, I went to stay with my two brothers, sometimes with one, sometimes with the other. But most of the time my brothers were busy doing forced labour as porters or cutting in the forest. Because of that, they couldn’t provide for me. They had to do so much labour. Sometimes they had only four days free in a month. Sometimes they even had to work days and nights depending on the emergency.

After my husband died, I had to do day labour in the NaSaKa camp looking after their chickens and grinding the chillies for their food. Even when I was pregnant they called me twice for one day’s work in their camp. Also, I only had two chickens near my house and the army took them from me. Shortly after my baby was born I decided to cross the border. I sold my own clothes to get money to pay for the boat fare and I arrived here with my two children. Here I am working in a fishing factory. CINT 182

I arrived in Bangladesh in January 1999. I lost my husband. He was always called by the military to do forced labour. About five months ago, my son was sick, so my husband refused to go with the army. But they came to pick up him up and took him to the Chittapurika army camp. There they shot at him in their camp. Then the soldiers came to call me to carry him to the hospital, but on the way he died. His name was Salim Ullah and he was 35 years old. After he died, I stayed with my parents-in-law, but they could not afford to feed me and my children. They told me that they no longer wanted to see me if I did not find a job. I could not find any work, so I decided to leave. Here, I am begging, and my son goes to the forest to gather firewood and sell it at the market. CINT 185

I arrived in Bangladesh in February 1999. I do not know where my husband is. The NaSaKa picked him up about two months ago and I haven’t heard from him since. I went to ask them about my husband, but I was beaten with a
wooden stick. The NaSaKa told me to go back to Bangladesh. I was so afraid and left. I came here with my daughters. My eldest daughter who is 11 is working as a housemaid. I am sometimes begging and sometimes working as a maid too. My youngest daughter who is six is also begging in the streets, but not together with me. That is how we are surviving. CINT 183

Portering and forced labour place great financial burdens on families by preventing wage earners from working and farmers from tending their fields. When each household in a village must send one person to work, often only women and children, elderly people, and new mothers, who are not engaged in income-generating activities are “free” to go. Because of that, there are often more women and girls than men and boys on sites where forced labour is regularly performed in rotation. Since women are also the family members most responsible for finding food and caring for children, their absence from their homes has far-reaching effects. In order to avoid forced labour, families that can afford to, pay fees directly to the army or to people whom they hire in their stead. In rural areas where cash income is scarce, particularly for single mothers, this is often not an option.

Women are in the most trouble because they are forced to do hard labour often. When the army asks for forced labourers, mostly women and children must go because the men are responsible for supporting the family. So they have to work to make money. CINT 91

We had to go and grow the paddy for them. If we did not go and work we were fined 500 kyats. I worked for the army over the last two years. When I had a baby, my husband and my elder children worked instead. Sometimes when I was pregnant, I went to work on rebuilding the road when my husband was sick. We dare not refuse the orders. Mostly the women are left in the village and had to work for the army at anything they ask. Most of the men had left to Thailand for the nice atmosphere and good jobs. This is often not an option.

People were told to repair the road. The [SPDC] soldiers asked everybody to do that, including the widows. Since my children [are grown and] don’t live with me, I had to go and work also, despite the rain and heat. After repairing the road we had to grow the grass beside the road before the rainy season came. Whenever they give an order, if you don’t go or go late you will be beaten. It is very common. I was never beaten because I was afraid to be like that and I always tried to go early. One day, a widow was beaten by the soldiers for coming late and she suffered badly as her hand was nearly broken. CINT 48

I was never a porter, but I often did forced labour. Every Saturday, all the government servants, including myself, had to work to build the pagoda in Than Tlang [although the villagers are Christian]. We also had to build a jeep road between the pagoda and the town centre. When it was near completion, the pagoda collapsed, and we had to build it again. I had to do it because I was a teacher. As a government servant I had to go myself [it was not possible to hire someone else]. CINT 169

I had to dig and crush limestone for the new army buildings. One person had to go from each house and those who didn’t were fined 200 kyat per house. More women than men were working, even though it’s very heavy work. The men have to work to make a living for the family, and women can’t do that. CINT 201

People often have to go and clear up the grass at the government-owned golf course on the hill. If we can’t go, we’re fined 500 kyat. Mostly women do this, because most of the men are away travelling away and doing business. CINT 207

Some women we spoke with stated that they felt the government uses forced labour with the deliberate intent of impoverishing rural populations.

My husband had to go porter for three days at a time. He had to cut firewood, fetch water, and carry logs to make a fence around our village. As for me, I have a small baby, and I had to go clean up the soldiers’ camp and cut their grass. The women have to go and fetch their water. Each day, 15 women have to go to work for them, and we take turns in cycles. Each day 15 women. We go group by group. CINT 270

The army often asks the villages for forced labors and to give money. We can’t give any more because we don’t have any food to survive ourselves. In addition, we don’t have the jobs. If they allow us to work, we can get the money and even we can give some money for them. We don’t have...
paddy fields and gardens. In this situation, we can't do anything. CINT 278

Making roads, bridges, canals, these jobs need to be done with machines. The government has machines, so why do they use us to do this work? If they use people, we will have to do it again later, because we can’t do a good job working just by hand. CINT 70

We have had to rebuild the Mawchi road many times already. This road has been there since the British times. It was built with machines. Now they make us rebuild the roads by hand just to make us poorer, so we don't have time to work. Why else would they take young girls and old women to do this work? If they wanted it done properly they would get the soldiers to do it with machines. What we repair breaks down quickly so we have to do it again. We can’t work enough for ourselves to buy food. Women must sell their tameins and their cooking pots just to feed their families. CINT 262

It is hoped that continued international pressure and the intervention of the International Labour Organization will bring an end to the practice of forced labour in the country.

EDUCATION AND WORK OPPORTUNITIES

Outside of farming and own-account work, education determines in large degree women’s eligibility for jobs. Women’s diminished access to education at all levels affects their employability. Despite the fact that few of the available jobs give graduates a chance to make use of their skills, in many fields employers still demand that candidates have completed high school or university. The stipulations that female students must achieve higher grades than their male counterparts to enter professional institutes such as engineering have guaranteed that few women work in these fields. Job choices for graduates with economics and arts degrees are largely confined to administrative positions in government offices and private companies, and teaching positions. During the long period of university closures after 1988, a generation of young women missed the opportunity to acquire accreditation that would make these opportunities available to them. At the same time, school closures have pushed many girls and women into the work force prematurely.

We waited for the universities to re-open, because without a degree from a university, you can’t do anything. But finally my friends and I looked for jobs in Thailand. We can earn money here and it’s more than we can make in Burma. CINT 78

We grow up hearing that women are supposed to stay with their parents or rely on their husbands, but nowadays that’s not possible. Most women are only able to study up to 10th standard at most, and can’t continue to university. If we don’t finish high school, we can only find a job of a lower standard with a smaller salary. So we are aware of this situation, but we still have ambitions to help ourselves and our families, so that inspired us to begin trading. CINT 193

I was studying, but because of the uprising, the schools closed, so I started doing cross-border trade. At that time, I still couldn’t pass 8th standard, so after the uprising started, I dropped out. Really I wanted to graduate and get a job in the government service, because Kalay area is underdeveloped and I hoped to do help by doing something there. But my family were traders, so I started trading clothing and preserved foods. CINT 213

In order to get a government service job, you should have a degree or certificate, some computer skills, and good looks. You also need connections with high-ranking officers. As I didn’t graduate and I don’t have any computer skills, I couldn’t find a job easily. So instead I worked as a housemaid. CINT 226

There are only three or four companies in the city closest to our town, and we cannot apply to get a job in these companies because we did not graduate from university yet. CINT 267

We left for Thailand after the uprising. It was a mass exodus to Thailand. Two months after the schools closed, they reopened and we wrote the examinations, but then they closed again. No one was interested in studying any more so we came here to work. CINT 282

If I had gone to university, I wanted to become a teacher. I don’t have enough education to work outside, so all I can do is work in our family business. We had a small shop and I sold things. CINT 283

During the period of university closures, in the absence of opportunities for tertiary education, many private schools opened offering courses such as computers and modeling. In particular, young women seek job-oriented training in data entry, word processing and other clerical skills. However only the more affluent can afford the tuition, and even after graduating, women are not guaranteed that they will find work.
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My family lives in Tamu township. We owned two acres of land. We had four sisters, but no boys in our family, and my father was not well. He got sick a lot. My eldest sister did the farming by herself, but she was injured in a car accident and after that she couldn’t work properly. My other sisters also worked on other people’s fields growing paddy.

There were no jobs for us to do to survive, only portering and forced labour all the time. It is not easy for my family to find money, so hiring someone else was very difficult. We had to carry the clothes and goods of the soldiers on overnight trips whenever they patrolled the hillsides. The road was just a path through the mountains, very rough. Usually, I couldn’t go because I’m not healthy. But my sisters went, then later we had to hire others to go because the things the soldiers carried were too heavy. If the forced labour was in our village, I went, usually about three times a month. Since I am not very strong physically, I can’t work out in the sun, and I usually got sick after doing this kind of work.

When I was in 10th standard, I finally I had to leave school because of my health. Before, I really wanted to be a doctor, and I tried very hard. But from 8th standard onwards, my health began to deteriorate because I kept getting malaria. I told my mother that if possible, I wanted to go to high school in Tamu and have private tuition in order to pass the 10th standard with distinction and enter a medical institute. But my dream didn’t come true. I could only attend school once in 10th standard before the exam, and I didn’t pass. And then I tried to sit the exam by correspondence, while I worked as a volunteer teacher. I taught children in a mountain village for three years and 7th Standard in my own village for one year. People collected money from each household to support me, because there weren’t enough teachers at the schools, so I got enough rations that I could send some money to my mother.

My father’s condition worsened, and also the family income was very low, so we mortgaged our house in order to send my father to hospital. My father was very old, and before he died, his whole body got swollen. He died on his ninth day in Tamu hospital. If we had had more money, we might have been able to send him to hospital sooner. We paid more than 20,000 kyat in hospital fees.

After my father died in 1997, we faced a lot of trouble. The costs were so high, and we had many debts, so we sold half the house, and we cleared our debts. But the money wasn’t enough — there was nothing left for us to eat. We mortgaged the other half of the house for 100,000 kyat and we sisters shared it together. I started travelling to Nga Phalang, the border market near Tamu, to change money with the traders. By doing this, we were able to survive for a while on our small profits. We saved money, both in kyat and in rupees, but one day when all three of us were at the border, the house was burgled and the 5,000 rupees we had saved were stolen. Luckily the thief didn’t manage to find one small purse we had hidden in a box, so we were left with 1,500 kyat and 200 rupees. After that we survived by selling Burmese snacks and cold drinks at the border.

Finally, I thought it would be better to come to India to find work. I came six months ago with my elder sister who is 30. We do construction here. Some days it’s enough, and others it’s not. We have a large debt still to pay off. It’s not easy to work, because I have malaria, and sometimes I have fever and dizziness at night, for a week at a time. I buy medicine at the market, enough for one day, and if I’m not OK the next day, I go again. I just tell the man at the pharmacy what my symptoms are and they give me some tablets. I don’t know what they are. I am not able to go to the clinic because it would cost at least 20 or 30 rupees.

My mother is still back in our village with my eldest sister and her son, and one of our nieces. My mother can’t work so much, because she is old and her eyesight is bad. My other sister had very bad malaria, and her health kept deteriorating until she finally died one time when she got fever. So her daughter came to live with us. My eldest sister’s son had to leave school last year when he was in the 9th standard because he had to go for portering so frequently that he couldn’t keep up with his course work. His father died a long time ago. He is working in house and estate construction and my sister is making bamboo walls that are sent to that company. We also send money to the two of them as much as we can, because their debts are also always increasing. CINT 206
My sister is 20 now. She wasn't able to enter university because the schools were closed after she graduated from high school. My family paid 30,000 kyat for her to do a computer course and also to learn basic accounting. She was lucky because the people who run the school are friends of my brother’s, and once she finished they hired her to work there. Now she teaches and helps out part-time. Actually she hardly gets any salary for this, just a small amount per month, but at least she can get some experience. It is better than doing nothing, and otherwise all she will do is sit around at home, since she can’t find any other job either.

For the majority of women who have not completed high school, university or other skills training, paid employment options remain limited.

**WOMEN IN THE PAID LABOUR FORCE**

There are no figures available quantifying women’s access to economic and social resources as compared to men. There are also no accurate recent figures on the number of women who do other kinds of work in addition to housework in Burma. The National Plan of Action quotes a 1995-96 government survey enumerating 8.17 million women in the labour force, but acknowledges that this does not reflect the large number of women employed in the informal sector, whose economic contribution is not recorded. The Department of Labour, quoting 1990 figures, estimates that 55% of women aged 15 to 59 in the total population are “economically active”, with most women working in agriculture and the service industry. During the period this survey was made, nearly 20% of girls aged 10 to 14 did paid work. Overall, the government claims that women comprise nearly a third of total enumerated workers. However, according to other estimates, the number of women working for income is equal to the number of men when those active in the informal sector are included.

Since there is virtually no supplementary sex-disaggregated data describing the kinds and conditions of women’s paid labour countrywide, the employment picture for Burma’s women remains hazy. This in itself is evidence of the lack of importance accorded to the issue. It is well known that women hold posts at the various levels of the civil service, and are highly visible in the medical and teaching professions. For those who have education or skills, there are relatively more jobs for women than in the past in private businesses. However, in both instances, specific information, for example, regarding salaries or distribution of women to men is difficult to access. Furthermore, these positions remain scarce in comparison with the total number of working women. The vast majority of women work in the informal sector, in manual and semi-skilled labour, and in the growing entertainment sector. Data is lacking for various reasons: because most own-account income and activity is not recorded, and because much of the employment (for example in day labour, sweatshops or sex work) is not regulated or is in fact illegal. What is known is that, on the whole, women’s earning power remains low.

**THE CIVIL SERVICE**

Men or women, there is no difference to find a job. But if you have money you can find a job more easily. Burma has no factories, no industry. People only rely on being government servants, and many are jobless.

Since much of the industry in Burma was only recently privatized or semi-privatized, for decades, apart from the agricultural sector, the government was the country’s largest employer. Women are well-represented in the medical and educational sectors of the civil service, but somewhat less so in other government offices and ministries. Women comprise 70-79% of all teachers, including at the university level, 100% of midwives and auxiliary mid-wives, and 98% of nurses. Both teaching and nursing are seen as respectable occupations for women, in keeping with their roles as mothers and nurturers. There are also a relatively large number of women doctors, who comprise 42% of the doctors in service, according to 1994 Department of Health statistics. Regardless of their positions, all civil servants are required to do basic army training.

There are a lot of women doctors, because they can’t become engineers, so they become doctors. And many nurses. Maybe 70% of the teachers are women. If men become teachers it means they can’t get into any other major, or any of the professions. People see male teachers as nothing compared to other professionals.

Out of 10 teachers, 8 of them, 80% are women, whether in a small school or in a university. I don’t know if it is because men don’t enjoy teaching.

While teaching and nursing are both respectable pro-
fessions for women, the remuneration they offer is low. Those who do not profit from corruption or work outside to supplement their meagre wages are often forced to rely on their parents to help them pay monthly expenses.

Even when my husband worked, we still couldn't make ends meet [in Rangoon]. In 1996, tutors were making 1,200, assistant lecturers were making 1,500, lecturers were making 1,800. If we look at the price of food, I would finish up the 1,200 that I was making within one week. That's only for food. Not for transportation. Only for daily bread. And in one week, I would use 1,200. But the prices were not as high in '96 as they are now. I have two daughters. To send them to school, I had to pay 1,000 for each for transportation. So, each month, I needed 2,000 for the school bus. That didn't include, pocket money, meals, money for books. I also had someone who cooked and took care of the kids because I was working. I had to hire someone. But the money that I had to pay was almost half of my salary. I had to pay at least 600 for one person to work as a nanny and housekeeper. My monthly salary was only 1,200. What should I do? CINT 93

CIVIL SERVICE WAGES

The failure of the government to set civil service wages at parity with the cost of living has drawn considerable criticism from foreign economists, including those in the World Bank. For the past 10 years, salaries of civil servants have remained very low. Civil service wages were raised in 1993, but only to meet previous increases in the cost of living. In December 1999, the average monthly wages for clerical workers, nurses, midwives, and primary and middle school teachers were between 900 and 1200 kyat per month (US $2 - 3.50 at black market rates), before deductions. High school teachers, university professors and more qualified health professionals earned incrementally more, the latter a maximum of around 2,000 kyat per month.

With the deductions for festival contributions and public works taken off every month, wage insufficiency has long meant that civil servants “moonlight” at other jobs in order to make ends meet, or engage in corruption. Office workers may charge for application forms or services that should be free. Many teachers sell snacks, do sewing or give extra-sessional tuition classes in addition to their regular teaching hours in order to meet their families’ needs. The situation for educators earning chronically low incomes for educators has become more acute as high schools and universities have closed repeatedly over the last decade in response to student protests.

As for the teachers [who had no other family members supplementing their salaries], they were really poor. They had no extra income. They only had their salaries. So they gave private tutoring. It’s called “waing” (circle) tutoring. For one subject with five or six students, they get about 10,000 a month [at a university level]. As for some, they sell the questions. The senior teachers or headmistresses would give away the questions and then get money from the students. Even if it is not much, it’s enough. They do a lot of bad things. Only when they do that, will they make enough money for food. It’s not possible to live on their salaries. There are nine out of ten who are corrupt. I can’t even say nine. There are ten who are corrupt. They’ll do it if they can get money. When the matriculation exams are graded, the students know their scores. In order to find out their scores, they have to pay money. They ask them to find out if they pass or fail. They give them money. If they fail, they ask them to pass them. Nowadays the education system is like that. CINT 93

In an abrupt attempt to shore up the difference, the SPDC announced suddenly in the last week of March 2000 that government salaries would be increased five times, bringing the minimum monthly wage to 3,000 kyat (US$8.70). In response to the dramatic decision, inflation immediately soared and the already devalued kyat plummeted further, from 330 to 350 to the US dollar. By August 2000, the kyat was trading at 400 per US dollar and money-lenders in the capital were being rounded up to prevent exchange of dollars and encourage the use of Foreign Exchange Certificates (FECs, the scrip circulated by the government in lieu of US dollars). By mid-2001, the kyat was still trading at 500 to the US dollar.
The reason that so many teachers are women is that there are no other dignified, respectable jobs for women! But as for the salary, you can think of it like this: house rent is 1,000 kyat per month, electricity is another 300, so by the time I’ve paid those two things my whole salary is used up. That’s before I even start trying to buy food or pay for transportation, school fees and books for my daughter, clothes, or anything else. No one can support themselves only on their salaries. My husband is a border trader. We can get by most of the time, but if any of us ever gets sick, it’s not enough. Then we’re in trouble. CINT 218

For a primary teacher, you should get 900 as a starting salary, but after they deducted all the fees, sometimes I actually had to pay them money -- I owed the school. Those who can, borrow from their parents. Those who can’t, who don’t have parents or whatever, have to grow paddy and find other outside work. Some do security work in their quarter. I was able to pay to avoid having to go do this myself, but those who can’t and can’t find others to do it have to go. Some teachers grow onions or garlic to make extra money, they have to find work. They work weekends, when the schools are closed. Some do night work, sewing other people’s clothes, that kind of thing. It depends on what they can do. Some sell snacks at the school. CINT 243

I’m a nurse, but I don’t work in a hospital because my mother said it’s not worth it, the wages are so small. CINT 35

Despite the low salaries, in Burma’s depressed economic climate, where unemployment is rampant, civil service jobs are still sought after, in large part due to the “extra earnings” that widespread corruption makes available to government workers. It is often said that the real take-home pay comes not from wages but from the money one can make on the side. With competition for the limited number of positions in government offices, opportunities for women are more limited, and often bribes must be paid to secure a job.

In order to get a government job, you have to have money. You need at least 10,000 to get a job in the government. If men have to pay 10,000, we women have to pay 15,000. If men have to pay 15,000 thousand, we women have to pay 20,000. And then once you get the job, the salary is only 800 kyat per month. Nowadays one pyi of rice can cost 100 kyat. Before we had a Burmese saying, “If you want to see a thousand, you must spend a hundred,” but now it seems like if you want to see a hundred you must spend thousands. CINT 193

If a woman has the education, she can be a police-woman. If she can give bribes for the post, she can get a job. CINT 61

If you have money, you don’t need to be qualified, you don’t need to have education. If you don’t have the qualifications, but you have money, you can buy a job. Really rich people, if their children don’t have education, they can bribe others to buy a position for them. If you have money you can get everything. CINT 92

I tried to work at the immigration department, but I had to pay 100,000 kyat if I wanted the job. CINT 80

One of my daughters graduated from high school. She wanted to be a school teacher and work for our family, but the SLORC officials told her very openly, “You won’t get the job unless you pay us first.” Our family had no money to give for that, so they didn’t consider her. CINT 166

Accordingly, the numbers of women in the civil service may be diminishing rather than increasing, since...
The work available in the private sector, while less than desirable in many ways, is easier to get and offers better remuneration.

**Promotions**

Since men are favoured for most of the higher administrative positions and few women are promoted to the level of department head or higher, a number of women spoke of a “glass ceiling” in the civil service, limiting their upward mobility. In 1993, when women comprised over 70% of all teachers, only 41% of primary school heads, 38% of middle school heads were women, and 41% of high school heads were women. Among university faculty, overall 70% are women, however in 1999 there was only one rector at a university level, and the number of deans and institute heads were unknown.

There are certain ranks when there is no promotion or advancement for the women. Few women are departmental directors, even in education where there are more women than men. In the basic education department, women are promoted only as high as to inspectors in state or division education offices under the male head officer. No woman is in the head position. In higher education, there are a few heads of department in Arts whereas most heads in Science are males. There are no women rectors yet. CINT 77

There is a glass ceiling, no doubt about it, particularly in the public sector. These higher positions are being filled by male civil servants. This could be because the military men are uncomfortable dealing with women, and probably the women are brighter than them, particularly than military men. Women are not promoted beyond a certain level unless there is some exceptional situation. CINT 126

It is not culturally acceptable to be heading a department or ministry as a woman, so we are excluded on that level. CINT 253

Women can be headmistresses at most, if they have very high education. In offices or government departments, women can be managers at most, but not directors. In government meetings, to have women sitting among the high-level people is unusual. CINT 267

**Regulation in the Public Sector**

Women civil servants do enjoy some guaranteed labour rights from the government. Education and Health Department workers, like all civil servants, are eligible to receive rice rations. However, several civil servants explained that this often meant government workers had to grow their own rice. (CINT 218)

The teachers [in Sagaing Division] had to plant paddy in fields designated by the soldiers, after we were told that the next year our rice quotas, the rations that all the civil servants receive, would be cut. So the government told us, you will have to plant your own rice to supply next year’s quota. The fields were expropriated from the farmers and given to the teachers, but the problem was that the teachers didn’t really know how to plant properly. As a result, the yield was so low that after the last rainy season, the land was returned to the farmers. I don’t take government rice rations because the rice is of such poor quality, so I was exempt from the planting. But the other teachers did it on Saturdays and Sundays. We were also called on Saturdays and Sundays to do other work, like road construction and moving stones. So often we had to work seven days a week. This is even though we get only 1200 kyat per month! CINT 218

The government servants [in Kachin State] have to do the planting and laboring in the paddy fields. They tell them, for example, this one is the education department field, this is for the public engineering department. They assign the fields to the departments, and every worker from those departments has to do the plowing work. If you cannot do it, you must pay money and hire someone to do that. This is done during office hours. There is only one person at the office. Sometimes all of them are there, working in the fields. CINT 120

Women civil servants are granted maternity leave of up to 90 days with two-thirds pay. Men and women receive equal pay for work of equal value, and theoretically they are both entitled to social security benefits, although in keeping with the low wages civil servants receive, these are small. One former teacher we spoke with started trading after her retirement because her pension amounted to less than 300 kyat per month. (CINT 278)

Most of the cases of harassment we heard concerned work in private companies, however some women also claimed that sexual harassment existed in the civil service and at universities.

Sexual harassment goes on every day, but no one really does anything. For example, we have to face crude remarks. A male co-worker might say, “You have a nice body,” or he might imply “Your breasts are bigger than so and so’s.” I would take it as a very offensive comment, but no one would do anything about it. The way to cope is to avoid that
person. If there is really a problem, most people try to solve it among themselves. The highest it will go most of the time is the department head. Very rarely will it go to the dean or the Minister. CINT 99

If there are mechanisms in place to deal with harassment in these environments, it would appear they are virtually unknown and rarely, if ever, used.

THE INFORMAL SECTOR

According to one study, most women employed informally work “full time, all day and every day of the week.”49 The same report found that in peri-urban townships of Rangoon and Mandalay, over half of women working for income sold small goods or collected refuse for recycling.50 Women and children living in these communities often do the same work (selling snacks or vegetables, doing laundry and housework, working in construction or small-scale manufacturing, producing fake copies of international brand-name merchandise) and receive the same earnings – estimated at between 50 and 100 kyat per day or less in 1997.51 Similar situations are encountered in other urban areas of the country.

I collect bottles for recycling. I have to walk all over the city all day and look for these bottles. I have two pigs as well. We buy them small and feed them for three months, and then we sell them for more money. Sometimes I also go into the mountains and bring back rice and whiskey to sell in the city. I make a little money every time I go, but I come back sick. The bus ticket is expensive (300 kyat return) and you have to pay for your luggage. If you have one bag of rice, you might pay 600 kyat, so the profit is small. CINT 34

Market Vending

While women have controlled a great deal of the country’s domestic trade for many decades, very few of them have managed large operations. Most trade is own-account, with vendors selling agricultural produce grown on family farms or prepared foods at small stalls, tables on the street, or from portable carriers, work that is also sometimes done by men. While vending provides a living for many, because of the nature of the goods and the scale of operation, the profits to be made are rarely large. Like other work in the informal sector, small-scale trade offers women no social security or other benefits.

Many women are supporting their families now. Most earn money just by selling things. Only a few sew or do other work. If you want to be a vendor, you don’t need much capital. You just need to be clever and honest and have a scale and bucket. Now the market in Tamu is very big, full of people from Monywa and lower Burma. CINT 200

Cross-Border Trade

In border areas, travelling to trade goods, either in different villages or across international borders, is one of the most common forms of income-generating work available to women. Men also work as traders, however women are more likely to trade inexpensive small goods such as foodstuffs and clothing. Women traders travel the length and breadth of the country, sometimes bringing in the bulk of the family’s income. They face frequent extortion and occasional sexual harassment from officials threatening to confiscate their goods at government checkpoints in border areas, and they usually travel in groups to avoid harassment from men generally.

My husband works with the Myanmar Timber Enterprise. He gets a little more than 1,000 kyat a month. We can’t eat enough, so he had to allow me to start doing trade. If I didn’t work, we wouldn’t have enough to send our children to school. CINT 237

If I had continued working as a government servant, I could not feed my family. I was a school teacher and taught the
children in Nine Mile Village. I got 750 kyats in salary but it was not even enough to buy a tanein [longyi]. At that time I was single and I thought if I came to India for trading it may be better than teaching in school. So I came here to do trading. CINT 198

I quit school in 8th standard because of the uprising. Before I worked in our family’s business. We had a shop in our house where we sold things such as fish paste and pickled vegetables. A few years ago it was enough for us. But later the price of goods climbed higher and higher and we couldn’t make a profit. My father is dead and we still have four other children at home besides me, so I left the business to my younger sister and started trading cross-border to make a living for my family.... Sometimes I sell alcohol, but since I can’t keep it for long [because the corresponding area in India is a “dry zone” and alcohol is prohibited], I sell it quickly on credit and my customers don’t want to repay me later, when they’ve already drunk it. So I’m getting really demoralized, because I’ve lost a lot of money. A woman needs to be strong and clever in order to tolerate the circumstances you face trading, losing capital and encountering dangers. I’ll tell you really, the drivers, the authorities and the officers, and some of the traders are really dreadful, they all harass women. CINT 191

While cross-border and long-distance trade is challenging, women are often said to be better at it than men because they are more able to negotiate with authorities. Although import and export of agricultural produce and small goods brings a great deal of revenue into Burma, many common food items and consumer products are arbitrarily restricted. Individual traders selling these items risk arrest, and thus many of the things commonly traded must be smuggled. In some areas of the country, transport of rice and other foodstuffs is restricted, because authorities want to control the flow of resources to insurgent groups.

More women trade than men because women can negotiate with the officials and clear the tax payments more easily on the road. The women can relate better to the officers because they are more patient and they have a better time getting them to negotiate. Most of the men traders are alcoholics and the officers also drink a lot. So they often get into fights when they’re negotiating tax payments. Women are also more effective in collecting debts from their customers.

In all of our travelling we always have paid a lot to the authorities, so we can only earn a very little profit from trading. Sometimes I travel to India on foot, a four day journey from Thantlan to Sai Han. I carry my goods on horseback and I come with friends in a group, because I am afraid of men during the trip through the forest. Men want to bother women or rape them if they see a woman travelling alone in jungle. They’ll rape a woman on the path even in daytime. So it is very dangerous for women to travel alone. We also have to worry about meeting soldiers on the way, because the soldiers always ask money from the people. Men traders are afraid of soldiers on the way, and if they want to travel by the jungle route, they let women go first to check the situation, then follow us quietly. CINT 193

I have three children. I started bringing rice across the border to sell on the India side after my husband died. I get a better price here, but because cross-border trading in commodities like rice, potatoes, onions is illegal, we have to smuggle our goods across. [Note: these regulations have changed in this area since this interview was conducted.] Before we hid our goods in the forest on the way when the authorities came, but now we can’t do that, because they even search the forest. We negotiate with the soldiers at the checkpoint first and if they say OK, we pay them a fee so we can cross. If they don’t allow us to cross, we do nothing that day, otherwise we risk being arrested and sent to prison. CINT 209

I used to trade in northern Karen State and Kayah State. I had to leave because I couldn’t survive any more. I carried vegetables and other groceries in a bamboo basket to small villages to sell. But the Burmese soldiers didn’t let me go to those small villages. If they saw us on the way, they would fire on us because those areas were under martial law. They thought we were feeding the insurgent groups and contacting the rebels. Many times I had to turn back because we heard on the way that the situation was bad. I couldn’t earn enough every day to cover my expenses. CINT 278

Those who do not have the capital to trade goods sometimes carry them through border crossings for others instead. Some women work as brokers, negotiating the gates and taxes required to import or export goods. Others simply porter items from one place to another, often on foot, a physically demanding job, since the more one can carry, the greater the profit from a single trip.

This is the easiest job available to the poor, because most people don’t want to do it. All the carriers are women. Only a few men do this work. Mostly men are working in government service or the church or monastery. Also the traders don’t want the male carriers. They prefer to hire female carriers because if something is happening on the way or there
Gathering Strength

are any problems with the authorities, women carriers can make more effective petitions than male carriers. Another thing is that the traders are afraid of hiring male carriers because if male carriers are found out by soldiers on the trip they will be taken as porters or for some kind of forced labour. If they refuse to be taken for portering they can be beaten or tortured by the soldiers. Even some women carriers have been harassed and slapped by the soldiers on the way. I never travel alone. I always travel with my female friends in a group. CINT 207

Paid Domestic Service

In Burma as in many countries, women doing paid domestic service are difficult to access and often very isolated, with few opportunities to meet others doing the same work. Since most are hired informally, rather than through agencies, there are no standards regulating their duties or work hours. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in urban areas, women who work as housemaids are often from rural areas and non-Burman ethnic groups. Unfortunately, we were only able to speak with one woman who had been a housemaid inside Burma, in Rangoon.

I was asked to worked for 15 hours a day, but if they needed me to do something urgently, even in middle of the night they came and woke me up to work. In the first three months I got 1,000 kyat a month salary, plus free food and a room. After that, they didn’t pay me salary and told me I could ask for all of it when I decided to go home. I tolerated the circumstances at first. But they began to treat me as a slave. They didn’t feed me well and they spoke to me using very rude and impolite words all the time. Finally, I couldn’t stand it anymore and I told them I was leaving. But when I left, they didn’t give me the wages owed to me like they said they would. They said they were discharging me from my duties for disobedience instead, and they gave me only a little money to go home. CINT 226

THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Construction Work

For women without skills or capital in urban areas, there are few alternatives to self-employment, such as rubbish collection, besides manual labour. Very few machines are used for most building construction, and with climatic extremes, the work is arduous. Women can be seen on construction sites throughout the country, carrying sand or bricks, usually for 150 to 200 kyat per day. Most do not wear

CREDIT

Although credit is a part of daily life for many women in Burma, both as borrowers and lenders, bank and government loans are uncommon. In times of need, most people borrow from their parents or others within their communities. Much lending is done at a community level through pawn-shops and brokers charging high interest rates. In 1998, 70% of families in surveyed peri-urban townships reported borrowing money “at least a few times a year,” often to finance medical treatment. According to one NGO conducting programs in urban areas, in 1999 wages for laborers averaged 200 kyat per day, but median debts with money-lenders ran around 5500 kyat, with monthly interest of 25 to 30%. Less than half of these indebted families had regular employment (five or more days per week). CINT 246

Women who own small food shops and dry goods stores and cross-border traders are also often creditors, and some we spoke with complained that they frequently lose money to unpaid debts.

I run a small shop and my husband works as a driver, so we should have enough to get by. But he hasn’t been paid his wages in three months, and many of my customers purchase on credit and haven’t paid their debts. CINT 03

In my shop business is not good because so many people don’t pay when they buy things. They say they will pay later, but they don’t. CINT 38

I sell dried and preserved foods and alcohol to the migrants from Burma who live here [in India]. If they buy things from me, they know that I have to go back to Burma, so they don’t pay for the goods at the time of sale. Because of that, sometimes I profit, but often I offer sales on credit and have to come again and again to try to collect my debts. So sometimes I make more than my costs, and sometimes I just cover them, and sometimes I lose money. It goes in a circle. Lately more and more I end up in debt. So sometimes I went back to Burma and pawned my possessions to replace the capital I lost last trip, and then on the next trip, if I sell better, I can redeem my possessions. CINT 191
protective clothing, because none is supplied. Labourers are sometimes hired daily, and almost always paid a daily rate, so illness or injury that prevents work means a day without wages.

Women are regarded as unskilled workers and have to carry bricks and stones and get the lowest wages. Men can be masons and thus earn a bit more. Women are the weaker sex. We don’t have as much physical strength as men do. Yet women work harder than men, we say in Burmese families. Because women are physically weaker than men, we earn a little less for similar work. CINT 248

Most girls who work on the construction sites don’t come from Rangoon, they move from Bago or Irrawaddy areas where there is a lot of forced labor, and when they can’t stand it anymore, they move to satellite towns [peri-urban townships] and work there for whatever they can get. CINT 85

Factory Work

Because of the cheap labour, many companies from Korea, Singapore and other parts of Southeast Asia have established factories in Burma. One well-known Burmese publication, Dana Magazine, claimed that in 2000, Burma had some 400 garment factories employing approximately 300,000 workers, most of them women with a 6th standard or lower level of education.53 However, some companies have withdrawn from Burma since that estimate was made. Skilled and unskilled positions at garment factories in urban and suburban areas of Rangoon such as Insein, Shwepyitha and Dagon Myothit pay on average 4,000 kyat per month. These factories usually require labourers adept in the use of electric sewing machines, a skill many poor women cannot acquire. The jobs are sought-after, despite the fact that they are less than ideal in many ways.

A lot of girls from rural areas and forcibly relocated communities do work in underground factories that produce copies of famous brands. Most are military joint venture companies like Lo Hsing Han’s.... The owners confiscate their ID cards and they are paid in advance and therefore always in debt in terms of work, so they can’t leave, they’re kept like prisoners at that site. In Burma, you can do nothing without your ID. CINT 85

The garment factories pay women workers 4,000 to 5,000 kyat per month, but their shifts are very long and you’re not allowed to rest during your shift. Moreover, the salary is not daily, but monthly, while most people in Hlaingthayar live from day-to-day and thus need daily wages to fulfill their daily requirements. CINT 246

While working conditions vary between companies, various reports indicate that conditions for workers in garment factories exporting goods overseas are often harsh, as is common in “sweatshops” throughout the Southeast Asian region. Employees are often asked to do overtime but given only very short rest breaks. Some women choose to do overtime even when it is not required, in order to earn more, and eventually suffer health problems as a result of overwork. Instances have also been reported of workers being unable to access medical treatment in cases of illness and exhaustion.

In garment factories, labour conditions are very bad; shifts are very long and women are not allowed to rest during their shift. We heard of one woman who suffered very bad diarrhea and asked her supervisor for permission to leave and go to the doctor. The supervisor refused to let her go until her shift was over. By then her diarrhea was so bad that she collapsed and died on her way to the clinic. CINT 246

I know some women who are supervisors in garment factories. Women work extremely long hours, they have normal shifts but overtime is paid extra so many women work overtime. They also get bonuses if their production level is high, for instance if they sew so many coats per day, so they work very hard, for more than 10 hours without rest, in order to earn more. As a consequence, they burn out very fast, get ill after a few months and then have to stop working in the factory. If they were migrant workers from other parts of Burma, they might not have another place to go and might resort to selling sex along the roadside to earn a living. In the factories, there is no time to rest or do anything else. CINT 259

A statement by the National League for Democracy on labour conditions in garment factories in Hlaingthayar states that workers are forced to do overtime regularly or risk losing their jobs, and are given only very restricted access to toilets and medical care.

... On the 16 May, 2000, one Ma Moe Moe Htay (worker on Line 6) took seriously ill at her workplace [at the Myanmar Yes garment factory] while working. Permission to rest was refused so she cried and begged the supervisor who saw her condition. She was then asked to hide behind the stacks of garments so that the employer would not see her. She was absent from work the next day. On 18 May 2000, her dead body was found clothed in the Myanmar Yes uniform....54
We were both working in a sewing factory in Pegu. If we worked overtime for 10 hours, we got 8,000 kyats [US$ 25] a month. But sometimes we couldn’t work that much, so we got less and it caused problems. 8,000 kyat is not enough to live well on in Burma. We were able to give money to our parents, for food and medicine, it was enough for that. But we were never able to buy things like clothes or make-up. In Thailand, we can save 10,000 kyat a month to send home to our parents and still have enough to live on here.

In central Burma, many of the “factories” are more accurately small family-run cottage industries, with relatively little mechanization. Certain areas are particularly known for their locally-produced blankets or longis. However, many of these businesses are closing down because they cannot compete with the market in manufactured goods imported from China. In order to keep prices low, wages are also extremely low. Hand-loom weavers and fabric dyers producing men’s longis, usually women, sometimes make as little as 45 kyat [less than US $0.30] per day, under conditions that threaten their health.

When I worked in a factory spinning yarn, we worked every day standing up, with only short breaks. By the end of the day we were very tired and found it hard to breathe because we had breathed in the cotton fibres all day. We had to eat bananas every morning and evening for nausea. Only young people can do this work, because it’s too hard for older people. Some worked 13 or 14 hours a day. Of the 30 employees, only three were male. The rest of us were between 13 and 30 years of age. CINT 195

Women who work dying pasos [longis] have to use harsh chemicals. Many develop skin diseases or breathing problems because they can’t protect themselves. CINT 244

Women who are hired to peel beans by hand also make 40 to 50 kyat per day. Women who roll cheroots (Burmese cigars) make 4 to 5 kyat per 100 cigars. Often this income is inadequate even to buy food on a daily basis. Consequently, many women employed in these businesses have migrated from central Burma across the border into India, where they can earn on average four times the wages they would make at home, as handloom weavers, domestic labourers or sex workers.

Companies

Private companies reemerged relatively recently in Burma, but after a flurry of investment during the mid-1990s, are now again diminishing in number. Among domestic ventures, women are very active in some kinds of businesses, usually those that are family-owned and -run, where eldest daughters are sometimes managers. Women have also long had a presence in such fields as publishing, though it remains a relatively exclusive domain. Recent government figures show that only 12.7% of higher management positions are occupied by women.55 Because operating a company of any size in Burma requires maintaining good relations with the authorities, women who work at this level are usually from elite families, privileged in comparison with the greater portion of Burmese society.

Single women are known to be very powerful and tough. I think the head of the Mandalay Beer is a woman. So there are girls in higher positions. But those girls have been abroad once or twice. Most of them are like that. Also there are many Chinese girls. Very few Burmese girls work for companies. Chinese girls who have been to Singapore, Bangkok, and other countries mostly work there. There are very few local Burmese girls who hold high positions in companies. CINT 93

One high-profile business woman is Win Win Nu, formerly responsible for marketing and operations at Mandalay Brewery. Born in Burma but part-owner
of a Singapore-based trading company, in just six months in joint venture with the government, she turned the failing corporation into a money-maker. However, as a reward for her success, she was accused of misappropriating funds (even though financial affairs were under government control) and stripped of her investment stake, an act she at the time of writing was contesting at the International Court of Justice. While the government’s actions against Win Win Nu cannot be called gender discrimination, they do show that privilege and connections are not always enough to guarantee managerial success in Burma’s political and economic climate.

Joint ventures between foreign-owned corporations and the Burmese government pay higher wages than virtually any other employment opportunity, and as a result administrative and secretarial positions with them are extremely desirable. However, these positions are also rare and thus available only to those who have either the connections or a very strong educational background to secure the highly contested posts.

I am the senior accounts secretary for a Singaporean company. I had to compete with 100 applicants for my position. I got it because I speak English and have a Bachelor of Commerce degree, and the equivalent of a M.B.A. [Master of Business Administration degree] - although at the time I studied it was called an M.Sc. [Master of Science degree] in Burma. Since the schools closed in the middle of my M.Sc., I had to go to Singapore to complete my degree. When I was hired in 1996, the company employed 200 local workers, but since that time they have had to lay people off, so now only me and one other Burman man, who is an engineer, are left. A lot of other Southeast Asian companies have pulled out without any notice. CINT 266

It is also widely maintained that women are not hired for their skills, but rather for their appearances, and that those who are older or not considered attractive would not be eligible for these jobs.

A few [women] can get secretarial positions, but for these you have to be pretty and smart, because mostly the women are hired for these positions for their looks. You can make between 10,000 and 50,000 a month, but these jobs are very rare. You also need connections to get them. CINT 91

There are many cartoons making fun of those companies wanting to hire more women than men. Since they are foreign companies, maybe the foreigners want to work around pretty women. I dearly, I think they want educated, pretty women. But since it’s Burma, they need connections so their business will run smoothly, so they hire colonels’ daughters, or director-generals’ daughters. CINT 99

There are frequent allegations of sexual harassment in foreign companies. While there is insufficient evidence from which to generalize the truth of this criticism, a number of urban women we spoke with said that they thought women’s work in companies was sexually exploitative, and that it was considered unsuitable for young unmarried women.

1st woman: As the economy worsens, everyone realizes that they should work. Girls have to work also. But when girls work, they don’t have equal opportunity to get jobs like boys. Girls are always looked down upon and oppressed. When a girl works in a company, it means that she isn’t called to do normal work in a company but only to be a companion for the employer, to be his entertainment. That means she has to serve the employer personally. Now in Rangoon, when a girl works in a company, she doesn’t have security. She is treated in a derogatory manner. Because the government is bad, women are being oppressed in this way. When a boy and a girl work in a company, the boy will get a normal job while the girl will get a job as a service girl for the company director or the manager. This is how women in Burma are being treated.

THE MYANMAR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS ASSOCIATION (MWEA)

According to information posted on the government web-page (www.myanmar.com), the Myanmar Women Entrepreneurs Association, the country’s first association of businesswomen, was formed to showcase the talents of women in commerce and allow them greater opportunities to coordinate their activities. Although the organization claims to be “non-profit, non-government and non-political,” many of the founding members have close contacts with members of the military regime, and the organization’s February 1995 inauguration ceremony was presided over by Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, Secretary 1 of the then SLORC. The organization has established a revolving fund and extended credit to 100 for small business and seasonal loans; however little is known about the projects or beneficiaries.
2nd woman: In Rangoon, when a girl works in a company, the community looks down on her. She has to face innuendo in her work place. This is only a minor problem. There are many other problems she has to face besides that she can't speak about. It is not considered appropriate to talk about what has been done to girls working in companies. Now many companies prefer to hire only good-looking women. They don't look for women with skills for the job. The girls must be young, pretty and active. They have to be able to accompany their employers when they go out at night. In Burma, it is not a custom for a girl to go out with a stranger especially when the stranger is a man. Now that the economy has declined, women have to do all these kinds of things. At home, they have to make up stories about why they were late getting home, so they say they have so much work at the office. Actually, these girls have to accompany their employers to parties. If they fail to fulfill their employers' wants, they will lose their jobs and their families will suffer.

3rd woman: I worked for 13 or 15 days. My employer called me to go with him somewhere. I refused to go with him so he dismissed me from the work. When you work in a company there is no security for you. The work is not formal. You can't do only the work in the workplace, but you have to participate in the social work for your employer. When you return home late, like after 8 o'clock, people think wrong of your job and that hurts your dignity. 

Retail Sales

Throughout the country, women work in retail sales, at privately-owned shops in urban centers and markets such as Rangoon's bustling Bogyoke (Scott) Market. While these positions pay well, as the businesses are often family-owned and -run, the women who work there must usually be relatives or friends of the owners. Department stores and shopping centers, most of them owned by Chinese, Wa or Kokang investors, are a relatively new phenomenon in Burma. These shops cater to tourists, expatriates and the relatively small middle and upper classes, purveying imported goods that are beyond the means of most local people. Jobs at department stores pay relatively well compared to other kinds of work, with salaries sometimes averaging 50,000 kyat per month or more, but most positions can only be secured through brokers or contacts. Retail stores prefer to hire women, and reportedly, as in the case of some private companies, hiring criteria are also based primarily on age and appearance.

You can only get a job by paying a broker one to two months' salary. Sometimes the relationships between the bosses and the staff are really disgusting. CINT 85

If we want to work in a big shop or a department store the owner always tests us for one month without payment and food. And after one month if the employer is satisfied with you then you will be offered full time work. If the employer is not satisfied you will not be offered work. This is a very common for young girls who try to get the jobs in the cities. CINT 226

One of my friends works in a jewellery store owned by a relative of Htun Gyi [a former SPDC member who was imprisoned for corruption]. The owners just tell the clerks to make the customers feel good. One Japanese customer asked to have a photo taken after purchasing a lot from the shop, and just when the shutter clicked he hugged my friend. She was very angry but she couldn't do anything. CINT 85

LACK OF INFORMAL & PRIVATE SECTOR REGULATION

The government say that they can't do anything for workers because it is a foreign company. The government say that we should welcome foreign investors and not oppose them. CINT 73

I wonder, how can [the laws on minimum wages and social security] be implemented in Myanmar, where half the national budget is allocated to the military and there is widespread so-called forced labour that is not paid at all? - CEDAW Committee member Chikako Taya

The most serious and immediate problems for women working in virtually all fields outside the civil service stem from lack of regulation. Women have no guarantees for the work that they do in the informal sector. Women who work in the home, in small family businesses, and as farmers, traders or market vendors have no job security in the case of disability or accident, and no benefits. Very few government controls for industry of any kind exist to ensure that women (or men, for that matter) enjoy safe working conditions, reasonable remuneration, regular hours, compensation for job-related injuries, work-related benefits such as social security or pensions, or other labour rights.

Even women who work in foreign- or locally-owned companies are guaranteed little protection of their labour rights by employers. Not having to maintain work sites according to labour standards in factories
and on building sites, and paying lower wages for longer hours, is often conducive to profit, a reason that many overseas corporations choose to establish production sites in Southeast Asia. The working conditions for many construction and factory jobs are physically hazardous, involving poorly-maintained machinery, heavy lifting, noxious chemicals, and repetitive motion, and can lead to disabilities or chronic pain after many years. However, most eyewitness evidence suggests workers are not provided with protective clothing, or properly maintained equipment, and are not compensated for accident or job-related illnesses. In particular, it appears that many jobs do not allow workers adequate rest breaks or appropriate medical treatment. Regulations safeguarding women's reproductive health and the specific conditions of pregnancy are not observed at most work-sites. On the whole, occupational hazards are great and the possibilities of compensation for health conditions relating to employment, or social security in the event of unexpected job loss, are slim.

Wages for women in virtually all fields are low to begin with, because of the limitations in the kinds of work available to them. Women also typically do not enjoy the same wages as men for work of equal value. In road, construction and farm work, where it is frequently assumed that men are more capable of heavy physical labour and therefore more productive, men are automatically paid up to a third more than women are. This discrimination makes survival much more difficult in families where women are household heads, because husbands have died or they have divorced, and in families with more daughters than sons.

To plant and harvest, in our area they hire both men and women, but usually the hired workers are mostly women, because women are smarter, they work harder, and men don't come forward. Still, men are paid more than women because it's believed that they are stronger and faster. But this isn't really fair. CINT 169

After my husband left, I faced so many difficulties with my children. I found another job, a job for the government to build the town hall. I carried bricks and cement and got 50 kyat per day. Then afterwards I worked in the construction of a college. I carried stones and cement. I tried to support my children, my mother and myself with 50 kyat per day.... The men got paid 70 kyat a day.... But everybody could see that the women were working harder than men. CINT 176

I've been doing construction work since I was 15. Now I'm 20. Usually women get 60 kyat and men get 80 kyat for ordinary labour. Men with more skills can get 150 to 200 kyat. CINT 205

In construction, for instance, women get paid less for similar work as men do, because they are regarded as unskilled labour. The girls in our workshops who are working on construction sites, complain about this; they do work which is as heavy as men's work and they work equally hard, they say, but they still get paid less than men. CINT 208

Additionally, as many of the testimonies excerpted here indicate, women in a broad range of work environments face sexual harassment on the job. Sometimes, women may be expected to accompany their bosses or co-workers after work; other times, women may be sexually intimidated, or specifically required to engage in sex, in order to keep their jobs or not be otherwise abused by their employers. It appears that at present the only way for women to protest this type of abuse is to quit, something that is often not an option.

The most serious obstacle to addressing these problems remains that, under the present conditions, women are prevented by restrictions on freedom of association from organizing themselves for better wages and working conditions. Although laws including the Law on Fundamental Workers Rights of 1964 and the Factories Act of 1951 exist on paper, it is not known how they are enforced or what resources are available to monitor or penalize offenders. Since there are no free trade unions, workers do not have the right to organize and bargain collectively to set wages and benefits. The Government's Central Arbitration Board does not func-
tion to settle labour disputes. While Burma is a member of the International Labour Organization and a signatory to many of its conventions, the government has repeatedly reneged on its labour commitments, sometimes ostensibly because of threats to national security. At its June 2001 meeting, the International Labour Organization imposed sanctions on Burma for failing to meet its obligations with regard to the Convention on Free Association and to protect workers’ rights to organize. The ILO now plans to send a high-level team to investigate the situation further. In the meantime, it remains exceedingly difficult for women workers to assert themselves, since they do so at risk of losing their jobs.

**THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY**

Women’s employment is increasing in the entertainment industry, with the opening of venues in urban areas and border towns such as coffee shops, karaoke bars and nightclubs. Until fairly recently, establishments of this nature were uncommon in Burma. Women who work in them often risk condemnation from their communities, since most are considered to be part of the sex industry, even though in some cases women are only required to wear revealing clothing or converse with male customers. While some women working in entertainment are employed at legitimate establishments, sometimes called indirect sex venues, where they are paid salaries, most of the industry involves direct sex venues that are illegal and underground, and thus out of the national accounts and the public eye. A considerable amount of sex work is informal and own account, with women working independently, however because of the stigma against sex workers and the power clients have over them, this does not necessarily mean that women have more control over their work situations. Most women consent to do sex work, though often without any other real options, thus it is arguable how much choice is involved. Since on the whole work of this kind is unregulated, women often encounter abusive situations where they are coerced to do things they did not agree to or are not paid the money owed them. Needless to say, in these events, they do not have recourse to the law.

**Sex Work**

Divorce, not enough food, no money for tuition fees. So many problems. Some married women also have to go for prostitution in order to make money. For younger women, you need clothing, you need food. So this is the easier way to find money. If it goes on like this, it will be very hard for Kachin people to progress. CINT 112

Both inside and outside Burma’s borders, increasing numbers of women are entering sex work as a means of survival. Community displacement often leaves women with few other employment choices, thus the greatest number of sex workers come from areas of forced relocation, including Shan State and the peri-urban townships of Rangoon. It has been reported that some women in and from Burma have started doing sex work after being raped or sexually abused, because in Burmese society, women who lose their virginity outside of marriage are “ruined” and “no longer care what happens to them.” However, the overwhelming majority of women doing sex work cite economic reasons.

Most women doing sex work have few other chances because they dropped out of school at the middle school level and thus cannot find other employment that will give them sufficient income. Women working in factories, for instance, work six days a week from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and earn 3,000 to 4,000 kyat per month, with which one cannot feed a family. And women construction labourers carry bricks and sand all day long, really heavy work for 150 to 200 kyat a day. Besides they are very dependent on their employers. We hear that they are manipulated and harassed by their bosses, who make them carry extra heavy loads and ask for a “favour” in order to diminish the load. This means that he’ll take you to some guest house after your shift “to eat something” and then want you to have sex with him. Sex workers can often earn better money than this. CINT 261

The peri-urban townships in Rangoon Division are seen as the “epicenter” of the sex industry in Burma. Women from these relocation areas may do sex work in their neighbourhoods, in downtown Rangoon, or travel to other places like the booming trade towns of Tamu, Sagaing Division and Hpakant, Kachin State. The degree to which women must pay pimps or brokers varies greatly in these different areas.

At nightclubs in glossy new hotels or above Theingyi Market, in 1999 altogether as many as 400 to 500 sex workers were working every night. In September 1999, an article in the Far Eastern Economic Review remarked on the phenomenon of highly visible sex workers at the large hotels in Rangoon and Mandalay built for the 1996 Visit Myanmar Year."
The Economy & Women’s Labour

Women have become prostitutes, tourist guides and done other jobs related to the tourist industry. That is why I was against the Visit Myanmar Year. There always are businessmen around the city (Rangoon) watching for girls who can be lured. CINT 25

Many women do sex work in Rangoon because it provides comparatively much more income than other jobs available to them. Sex workers in upmarket venues such as discotheques can charge foreign clientele including Chinese and Korean businessmen US $100 per night, though with the departure of many foreign investment firms from Rangoon, this often drops closer to $50. Sex workers in nightclubs work independently and can keep most of their earnings, though they must pay a small amount to hotel or nightclub staff and provide the cover charge for entering the club. Most of the sex workers in downtown Rangoon who come from peri-urban townships must travel by taxi into the city, an expense of 1,000 kyat or more per night, however the earnings and work conditions are relatively better than what they can find in their neighbourhoods.

However, probably the greatest number of women doing sex work in Burma do not have foreign customers. UNICEF quotes findings of one study of five townships that found 90% of male STD clinic respondents had recently paid for sex.60

There is a high demand for commercial sex workers from local men, because they can only find extramarital sex partners if they pay for the sex. Few women will engage in extramarital relationships, that is considered inappropriate here, unlike in the West where it is much more common. Commercial sex, however, is socially tolerated. CINT 260

Conditions for sex work are worst in peri-urban townships in Rangoon and Mandalay. Many of the women who do sex work are divorced, or married with husbands who are absent frequently or for long periods of time while working in other townships or distant areas. Doing sex work in these neighbourhoods is usually a last resort for women who lack any other source of income. In peri-urban townships, sex workers may charge up to 200 kyat per night (which does not necessarily mean per customer), half of which goes to their pimp. But in 1999, it was reported that some women in these townships were so financially desperate that they were charging as little as five kyat per customer.

Mothers feel obliged to arrange to have food for the family and the husband’s income is so low that they become commercial sex workers for a while for the well-being of the family. Sometimes their husband knows and lets them do it because they get money at least. This is the main reason why commercial sex work has increased so much. If the community knows that a woman is a commercial sex worker, she is treated with less respect. That is why most women prefer not to work in their own township, because there is not enough privacy for protection of their public image there. Poverty drives women to doing commercial sex work, the most easily accessible type of work. Because of this, the women are at a higher risk of HIV infection. There are still many commercial sex workers who don’t know anything about condoms, especially the ones who come to the capital from other parts of the country. CINT 246

Women sometimes travel from peri-urban townships in Rangoon and other areas to work in more distant places on cross-border trade routes, like Kawthaung.

 MASSAGE PARLOURS

According to the Mizzima News Group, in North Okkalapa and other parts of Yangon Division, at the end of 1999 there were at least 30 massage parlours, most attached to beauty parlours. Normally they charge customers 1,000 to 1,500 kyat (US $3 to 4) for one session. For a naked massage, the customer pays more, around 6,000 kyat per hour. The employees get 200 kyat per hour in wages. The women working in these establishments come from all over Burma, including Mandalay, Shan State and Karen State. Each is expected to service at least five persons a day.

It is alleged that the owners must pay protection money to the military intelligence, and that some businesses are run by intelligence agencies and cease-fire groups such as the Wa and Kokang. Mizzima reports there is one massage parlour in the compound of No. 26 Military Intelligence Unit in Rangoon, however this has not been verified independently. The organization also claims that since 1998 the number of karaoke bars and massage parlours has increased in the cease-fire areas of Shan State controlled by the Wa and Kokang.58

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Gathering Strength

in southern Tenasserim division, Tamu, in Sagaing Division, Hpakant, the jade-mining area in Kachin State, and Kengtung and Tachilek in Shan State. If a woman is taken by a broker for a stint of two to three weeks, she can earn 1,000 to 3,000 kyat per day, though the brothel keeps a large portion. Women sometimes do this with the hope of starting small businesses after they return home. Sex workers often work at truck stops in towns on major transportation routes. Local sex workers in Tamu, where customers at Gorkha Gone quarter brothels include military personnel, make less, usually between 100 to 300 kyat per customer, and keep one third of their earnings.

I know one brothel in Tamu. Many young girls of about 14 and 16 years old are living there and I felt so sad for them. The girls are from different places such as Mandalay, Monywa and Kalay. Most of them are poor and as they are young girls, they want to live, eat, and dress well like other girls. So even if they have no desire to be prostitutes they do it. But some of them were persuaded to do this work by other people saying to them there will be jobs to do, and then they followed those people and finally they were sold to the brothel. Actually, there are many girls of school age who are involved in prostitution in many places in Tamu. The Mamasans change the girls all the time. If the girls are getting older they are replaced with new young girls. I didn’t see the authorities arresting those people. Even if they arrested them, they did it merely for show to the people and then one or two days later the arrested people were released.

In Ma U Bin area the economic situation is getting worse and worse. Everyone in each family must try to work hard. Before, daily wages for work such as construction and cement mixing were available for women, but nowadays, there is no construction work in our area. Even if a woman wants to sell vegetables she needs the capital to get the vegetables. Because of this situation, a lot of girls are having their characters’ ruined and getting involved in underground work. Many of them go up and down from central Burma to

LIQUOR SALES

When you work there, if you sell a lot, you get lots of bonuses. If you sell ten bottles, you get a commission. The company owners give them. In order to sell more, the girls have to entice the guys in various ways. So it’s not nice. It’s not like selling alcohol in a normal way. CINT 93

We were given a one-week training on how to attract customers, how to open beer bottles, how to decant beer for customers, how to handle drunken customers, and some do’s and don’ts. We usually have to work in the evening, and transportation is provided. We sell beer at restaurants which have a business deal with the company. Everyone is assigned to one restaurant per night, and we rotate the restaurants. I usually work at five or six different restaurants. I don’t really always like working among the male customers, especially when they are drunk, but I don’t have much choice right now. I don’t have enough education to find something else, and I can’t afford to go back to a private school to learn any other skills like typing or accounting. CINT 76

KARAOKE

I have a friend in Mandalay who has a very good voice, so she sings at shows and parties at night. This is considered very wrong in Burmese society. People look down on women who do this. She has to sing to support her family. She has finished high school and her mother is a government servant. CINT 73

Some women sing at the karaoke bars. The rich people who go there give them a garland of flowers and money. Then try to be intimate. First they try to be friends, then some have to become wives of the rich men. By “wives” I mean it’s only for the men’s pleasure. Some rich men turn them into mistresses and take care of them. After they get used to this, the girls want to live nicely. The government jobs don’t bring good money. These girls may be educated, but it is very difficult to make an honest living. In the end, they became mistresses and entertainers. Many are educated. They are not illiterates. There are university graduates among them. They think, “Even if I work in a company, I am not going to make that much money.” They make more money singing there. They don’t have to be professional singers. It’s enough if you can sing a little. They will dance on stage dressed up. There are more and more girls doing that since 1994. CINT 93
Kawthaung where they work in the flesh trade for their family's survival. If they work as house servants they can get less money. So doing prostitution is better because they can make money easily and can get more money. They are between 14 and 25 years old. CINT 226

In Hpakant, in addition to those who come from urban areas where work is scarce, many women migrate temporarily from nearby communities and from relocation areas.

Women go to Hpakant to sell their products, but they can't sell much. A lot of women borrow on credit. Then they also sell, accepting other people's credit. When the traders don't give them money, they run into a cash flow problem. That's when they get "spoiled." Because of this situation, they may not get paid for 10 months or more. So finally they're forced to do "that kind of work." They end up staying in Hpakant because they can't return home with nothing. Also people are disgusted with them. The society looks down on them and no one wants to associate with them. But women can't get other work. CINT 119

Anecdotal reports claim that sex workers have moved or been trafficked inside Burma into areas where there are large numbers of standing troops, for example Karonn State, however the conditions they work under remain undocumented. In Mon State, one army defector interviewed said that soldiers visit sex workers regularly, usually paying one woman for the whole night. He also noted that that wives of soldiers living at army bases turn to commercial sex work when they are not able to support their families, because their husbands have not been paid their full wages or are absent over long periods of time, leaving them without income.

I have been visiting prostitutes. It is easy to find them. Most of them are from poor families. When I was in Mawby, I paid 50 kyat for one time, or 500 kyat for one woman for one night. We usually go one by one for the whole night. Sometimes, we ordered her for two [men], but being soldiers, we used her for five or six men. It was in 1995-96. Although she disagreed, she dared not complain.

Some soldiers' wives find money as sex workers. They have to find a way to feed their family when their husbands are at the frontline. They do not receive any rations, only rice. Some families who have many children have to face lots of difficulties. I have seen with my own eyes that some of them became prostitutes. Some of them are my wife's friends. One is the wife of a corporal. She has four children and it is very difficult to survive with 900 kyat of her husband's salary. So she started selling cheh [a type of unofficial lottery] and later she turned to prostitution. CINT 139

The occupational hazards women who do sex work face go beyond ignominy in their communities. Sex workers are always at risk of arrest, and face the likelihood of rape in jail or prison. In most cases, women have little control over the situations they work in, and may be forced to do things they have not agreed to. However, it is evident that many men believe forcing a woman doing sex work to have sex she has not consented to is not considered rape. (See Violence Against Women.)

Just recently, a sex worker from Hlaingthayar who was caught after having sex with a policeman was sentenced to two years in jail. The normal prison term is one year, but she got more because it was with a police officer. Local sex workers ask for 200 kyat per night, of which at least 100 kyat goes to their pimp. This is the price for one night, and although they go on the understanding that it is with one man only, especially with Burmese men it is not uncommon to find more men present in the hotel room and having to do it with all of them for the same price. One sex worker from Hlaingthayar recently had to have sex two times with each of twelve men during one night, though she agreed to go with just one man. CINT 260

There is very little public education about HIV/AIDS in Burma, so women doing sex work are at high risk of contracting the virus. They can also be arrested for possessing condoms if stopped by police, and thus for the most part do not carry condoms.

Condoms for women are seen as a sign of prostitution. This makes condom promotion among them extremely difficult. Men cannot be arrested for carrying condoms. CINT 246

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Under Article 11, governments are obliged to eliminate discrimination in the workplace and ensure that women have equal opportunities with men regarding their choice of profession and employment. They must also guarantee women's rights to equal remuneration and treatment for work of equal value, social security, protection of health and safety, special protection to women during pregnancy, and the right to maternity leave with pay and without loss
of employment. In addition to this article of the CEDAW, these rights are enshrined under various ILO Conventions protecting workers' rights, to which Burma is a party. Under Article 14 of the CEDAW, governments pledge to undertake special consideration of the particular needs of rural women, who often have less access to programs or resources than their urban sisters do. Article 6 compels governments to eliminate trafficking and exploitation of prostitution.

Given the conditions in which most of the country's women live, poverty alleviation should be a government priority. The government's mismanagement of the economy has resulted largely from attempts to monitor and control all facets of life within the country as a part of maintaining its grip on power. Despite Burma's rich resource base, the military administration has been unable to enact clear and effective policies to improve economic conditions for the majority of the country's people. Since women are entrusted with the mundane responsibilities of making ends meet, the burden of poverty often weighs more heavily on them. Food scarcity and inflation have pushed more women of all ages to find income-generating work, where most have little real choice as to employment, but must take any position which affords some kind of salary. Improving the lot of the majority of the country's women will first require broad-based economic reform. More research is also needed to determine the specific effects of gender on women's experience of poverty.

With Burma's largely agrarian population, many of the government policies that affect women's financial means are related to farming. Crop procurement, arbitrary taxation, and land confiscation place women, particularly when they are household heads, in poverty and debt. Forced relocation, undertaken in concert with military attempts to control ethnic areas, has caused widespread internal population displacement to inhospitable areas. This coerced movement leaves women with few employment opportunities and encourages their further migration, often into sex work and other exploitative labour situations. These policies that negatively affect rural women's abilities to support their families contravene the CEDAW, including Article 16, which gives women the right to choose their residence, and Burma's international obligations as a member of the United Nations to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They should be revoked immediately, in order to provide rural women the economic stability they require to support themselves and their families in dignity and peace. At the same time, rural development programs are needed to enlarge the employment possibilities for women, who currently have few opportunities outside of unpaid family farm labour.

In rural and urban areas, the government's use of forced labour adds to women's burdens by reducing their earning hours. Since women are often seen as expendable workers, they are more likely to provide labour when it is demanded of families. In accordance with the recommendations of the ILO Commission of Inquiry into Forced Labour in Burma and obligations under ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour, the government should immediately halt the use of forced labour, and cooperate with the ILO's high-level investigative team, to ensure that the practice is indeed eliminated on the ground and that offenders are prosecuted.

Education programs encouraging a fairer division of household labour between male and female family members would allow women more time to devote to paid work outside the home. Many women are now restricted by family responsibilities, requiring them to work from their homes or only part-time outside them, and thus limiting their wage-earning hours. Provision of daycare or other child-minding arrangements would allow a greater number of women freedom to engage in the wage-labour they need to support their families.

In towns and cities, the government remains one of the country's major employers. However, women in the civil service typically work at the lowest echelons in a few traditionally female-dominated fields and enjoy inadequate wages, with few opportunities for promotion. At the same time, arbitrary pay raises have only contributed to inflation. Moves to increase women's earning power as public servants must be taken in concert with general revisions to the government's economic policies, and should include efforts to mainstream more women into the upper levels of the civil service hierarchy.

The conditions of work available to average women in the private sector, from unskilled labour to clerical positions in private companies to work in the entertainment industry, are inadequately regulated
at present, and do not allow women to work in safety, free from such pressures as sexual harassment. Government compliance with obligations to various ILO Conventions, particularly No. 87, Freedom of Association and the Protection of the Right to Organize, 1948, would allow women to freely form and participate in trade unions, and thereby organize to protect their own rights to work in appropriate conditions and equal pay for work of equal value. Review of labour laws should be undertaken to guarantee that existing legislation is not discriminatory, and further to this, laws should be enforced, with adequate provisions for legal aid, including in the private sector.

At present, sex work remains one of the more highly remunerated, albeit often undesirable, options for women. The growth of the sex industry in a country where sex workers face strong social censure is further evidence of the dearth of job opportunities for women. Sex work should be decriminalized at the earliest in order to stem the growth of the underground sex industry, which puts women at greater risk of exploitation and limits opportunities for their protection from HIV/AIDS.

In terms of job creation, the government should pay more attention to the critical link between women’s education and their employment abilities, recognizing that discriminatory admission practices to non-traditional fields of study are inhibiting women’s participation in the formal economy. Under existing conditions, women occupy a much greater share of the informal than the formal labour sector, and as a result, are unable to enjoy employment security or benefits such as compensation for injury or pension plans. In order to create jobs for women in diverse fields, more appropriate training is needed, including in the use of modern technologies such as computers. Existing vocational programs focusing on handicraft and textile production and other traditional skills do not adequately prepare women to participate in the changing economy or allow them to compete with men for positions. Given women’s entrepreneurial experience in self-account trading, implementing and expanding business loan and micro-credit programs alongside training programs for women, for example in management, would also allow women greater self-sufficiency. However, any such programs should include information about women’s rights as workers, and they should be monitored regularly to assess their impact on women’s lives and economic empowerment.

NOTES
2. The Myanmar Times, while nominally independent, is believed to purport the views of military intelligence.
10. World Bank, Myanmar: An Economic and Social Assessment, p. 15.
15. World Bank, Myanmar: An Economic and Social Assessment, p. 88.
17. People’s Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma, *Voice of the Hungry Nation*, p. 71-73.
23. A pyi is a measure of dry volume used in Burma equivalent to 8 - 300 milliliter milk-tins, or 2.4 liters. The price per pyi varies depending on the quality of rice.
30. Many of these conditions also exist in peri-urban townships, where inhabitants often face even greater environmental health problems from improper waste disposal. Rubbish disposal is a growing concern in many communities, especially due to the recent introduction of non-biodegradable refuse such as plastic.
33. Union of Myanmar, “Report on the CEDAW,” p. 36. It is also unclear if this money is government expenditures only, or if it reflects contributions of partner NGOs and UN agencies.
35. World Bank, *Myanmar: An Economic and Social Assessment*. However, it is unclear from data whether this estimate includes upland cultivators who have worked mountainside plots for generations but hold no deeds to their land.
44. Myanmar National Committee for Women’s Affairs, “Status of Myanmar Women,” March 1998, p. 15. In the government report to the CEDAW Committee, the figure given is 6.57 million, also from the Department of Labour.
49. UNICEF & the Myanmar Department of Labour, *Working Children and Women in Myanmar’s Urban Informal Sector* (Yangon: Department of Labour, Ministry of...
50. UNICEF et al., *Working Children and Women*, p. 36. Significantly, this 157 page study devotes only 12 pages to working women.
52. World Bank, p. 17.
54. NLD Statement 130 (8/00).
58. Mizzima online news as reported on Burmanet News # 1416, December 20, 1999.